ELECTRONIC SOUND

THE ELECTRONIC MUSIC MAGAZINE

ISSUE 88

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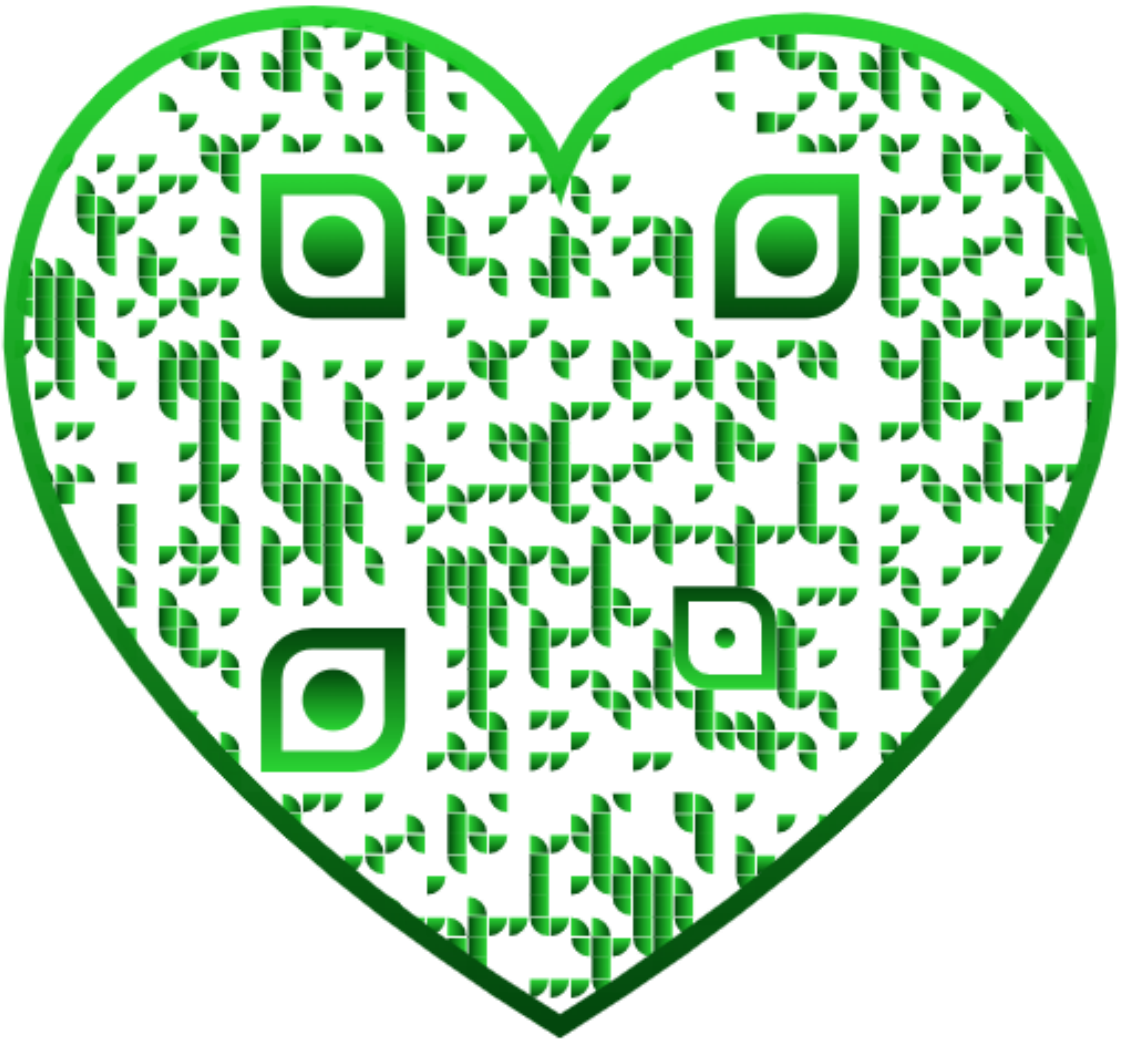
LAIBACH

THE ENDURING ENIGMA

HANNAH PEEL / TEARS FOR FEARS / NIK COLK VOID / LORAINE JAMES / KAVINSKY / BETTY BOO

AND RELAX



WELCOME TO ELECTRONIC SOUND

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There aren't many bands like Laibach. Or maybe that should be any. Trying to explain who they are and what they do is quite the challenge, but that's the task we've set ourselves for this month's cover feature.

Formed at the start of the 1980s in a Slovenian mining town in what was then Yugoslavia, the band arrived as part of wider art movement, Neue Slowenische Kunst, which they co-founded against a backdrop of massive upheaval in the region. The NSK collective featured several different factions. Alongside Laibach, who were the music wing of the movement, there was a theatre group, an audio-visual unit, a team of graphic designers, a team of filmmakers, and even a philosopher or two (working under the banner of the Department of Pure and Applied Philosophy).

The various arms of NSK addressed ideas of culture and national identity in Slovenia at a time when bloody and brutal ethnic conflicts were tearing the former Yugoslavia apart. This is all clearly weighty stuff, but Laibach have always tackled issues with such fearless invention, not to mention plenty of good humour, that it's hard not to marvel at their incredible body of work. Ed Sheeran singing "I'm in love with the shape of you" this is not. And if you're wondering why frontman Milan Fras is holding an owl on the opening spread of the feature, well, we have no idea whatsoever. It's Laibach, innit?

We have a dazzling array of synthy goodness as this month's supporting cast. Hannah Peel talks about her fascinating new project with Paraorchestra and Tears For Fears reflect on their first album in nearly 20 years. Nik Colk Void, Loraine James and Kavinsky are our other main interviews, while our always jam-packed reviews section kicks off with Plastikman's reworking of his classic 'Consumed' album with Chilly Gonzales at the piano. We've got a busy front section too, including Betty Boo and Sonic Boom, plus a great story about a new short film about Andrew Weatherall.

Before we go, we'd also like to take a moment to bid farewell to our commissioning editor Neil Mason, who is leaving Electronic Sound after the best part of a decade. See page 28 for our more fulsome adieu, but we want to end this by acknowledging the huge contribution he has made to every edition of the magazine we've produced so far. Many thanks Neil. We probably owe you a pint.

Electronically yours
Push and Mark

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READERS' WIRES

Various UK locations

24 MARCH 2022

There we were, idly flicking through social media when we noticed a flurry of modular set-up pics. Don't know if it's the weather, the musical sap rising, or just the hive mind doing its work, so we thought we'd stick a finger in the air and take the modular temperature…

(1) In Lancashire, Field Lines Cartographer was working in the garden on his live sound. "I like to switch it up each year to keep my gigs interesting, well, for me at least," he laughs. When can we hear the fruit of his labours? "Some of the live Buchla tracks will feature on an album for the US label Behind The Sky," he says. "When that'll be released I'm not sure as there's a huge backlog with vinyl pressing in the States too."

(2) "I'm putting a set-up together to start work on a new album," says Alex from Fields We Found from a secret countryside location "not far from London". Does he have a favourite mod? "In the set-up for the recent 'Expanse' album," he tells us, "I designed the modular to be my ideal sampler with the Rossum-Electro Assimil8or and ALM Squid Salmple at the core." You can find the 'Expanse' album on fieldswefound.bandcamp.com with proceeds going to mental health charity Voices Of Children who, says Alex, are "doing incredible work in Ukraine right now".

(3) Willie Gibson tuned in from "deepest Cambridgeshire" and explains that the pictured patch wasn't for anything in particular. He does however reveal he's working on tracks for an extended version of last year's 'The Halls Of Piranesi' album (williegibson.bandcamp.com), which was inspired by the book 'Piranesi' by Susanna Clarke. Key module? "I'd say that would have to be the Klee sequencer," he offers.

(4) "I'm trying to perfect a patch I can use to improvise on for my next gig – supporting Ian Boddy at The Capstone Theatre in Liverpool on 30 April," says Polypores from his Preston HQ. "For this particular patch, Make Noise's Rene 2 is doing a lot of heavy lifting." He adds that if the recording of the gig goes well, the set may end up on polypores.bandcamp.com

(5) In Sherborne, Dorset, Matthew J Saunders is working on a second Twilight Sequence LP (the first is out in the autumn on Castles In Space). "It's based on my walks around the lanes, fields and woods where I live," he says. He mentions the Doepfer A-149-1 RCV Quantized/Stored Random Voltages module as his go-to and the patch in the photo was used for Twilight Sequence's 'Trees In General: And The Larch', which you'll find at twilightsequence-cis.bandcamp.com

That's all well and good, but let's get down to the real nitty-gritty. Who's got the most patch cables?

"I was curious when you asked," says Polypores. "So I just counted. 124." Field Lines Cartographer was more modest, with "probably about 50 minijacks, 30 banana jacks for the Buchlas". Willie Gibson sent us a photo of his cables, which we estimate is around 150. The Fields We Found collection clocks in at "probably 2-300, but it could be more!", while Matthew Saunders lays claim to a very precise 260.

So that's the temperature. We look forward to all these recordings landing at some point soon.

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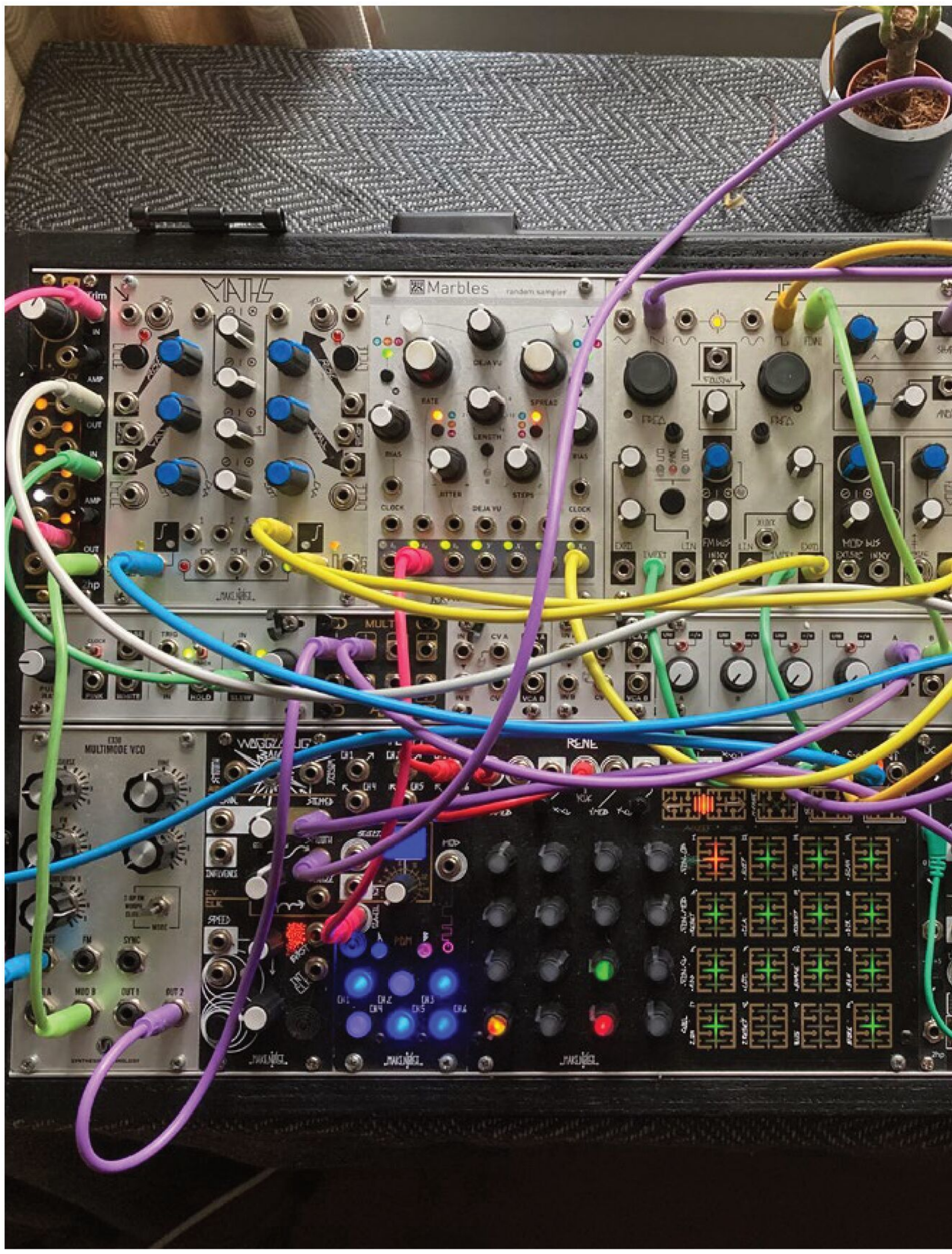

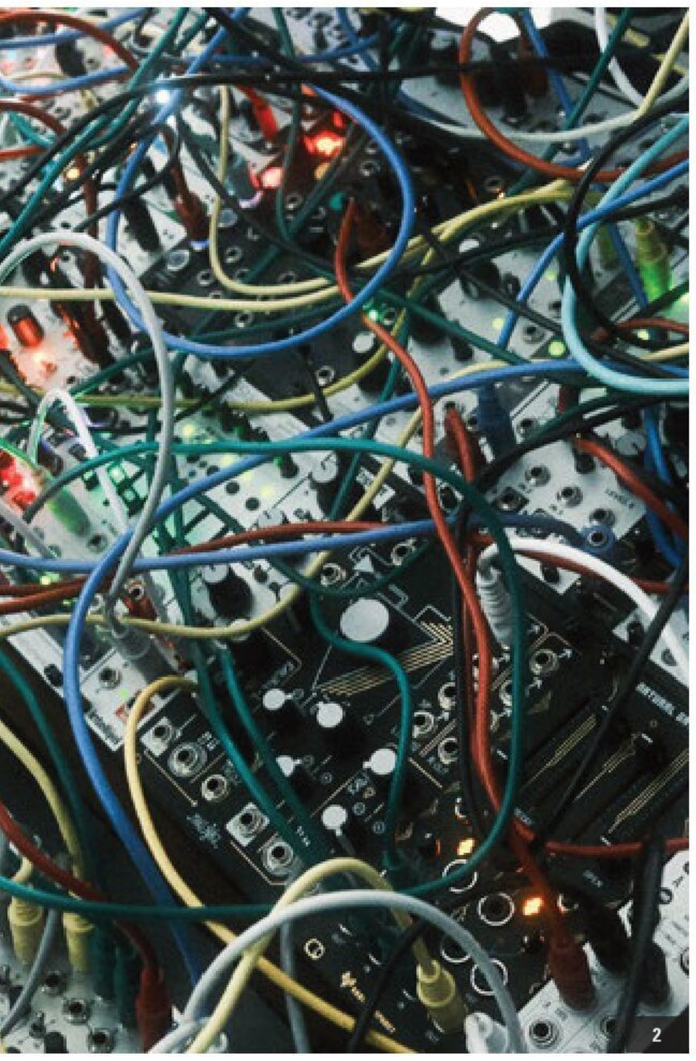

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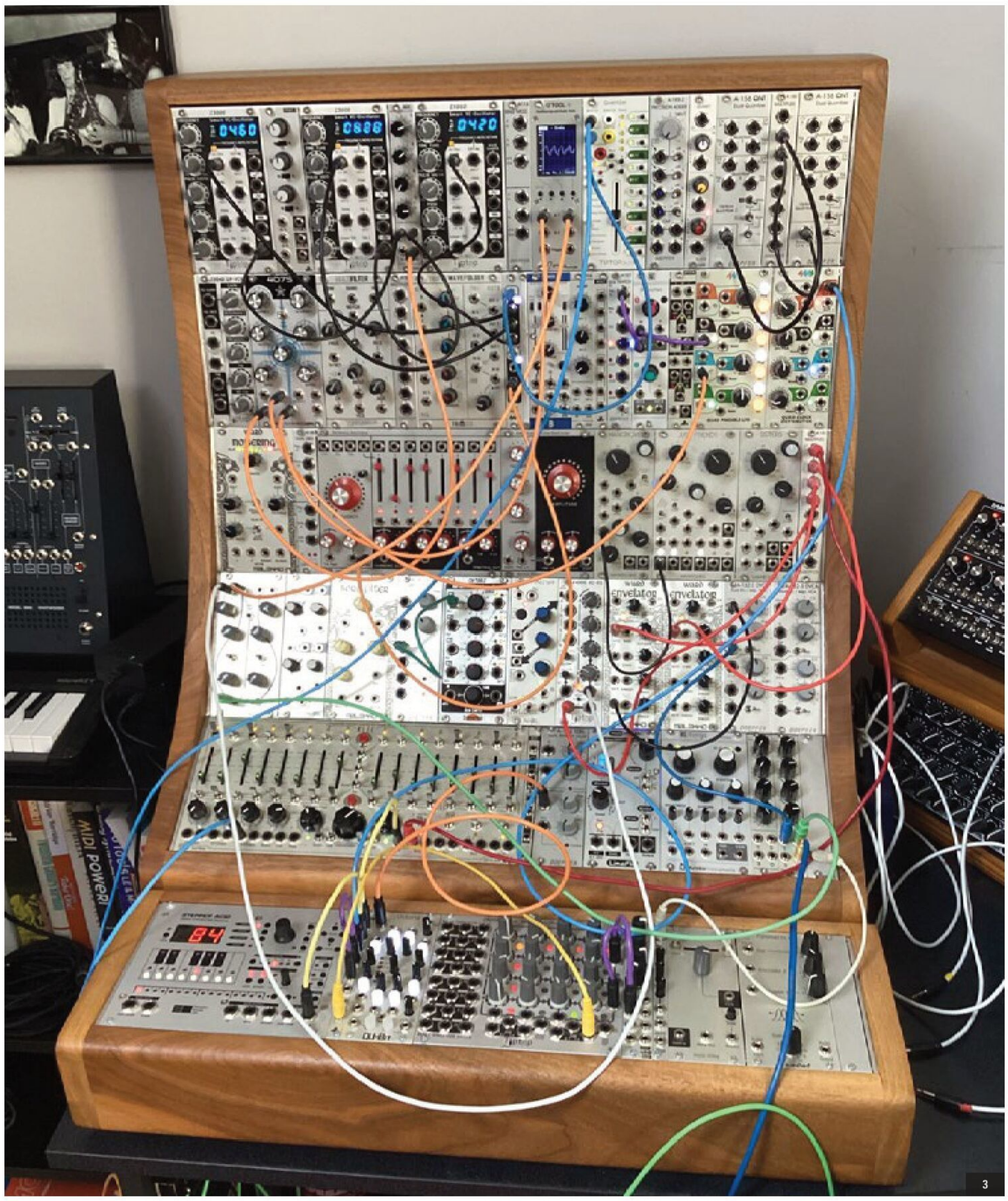
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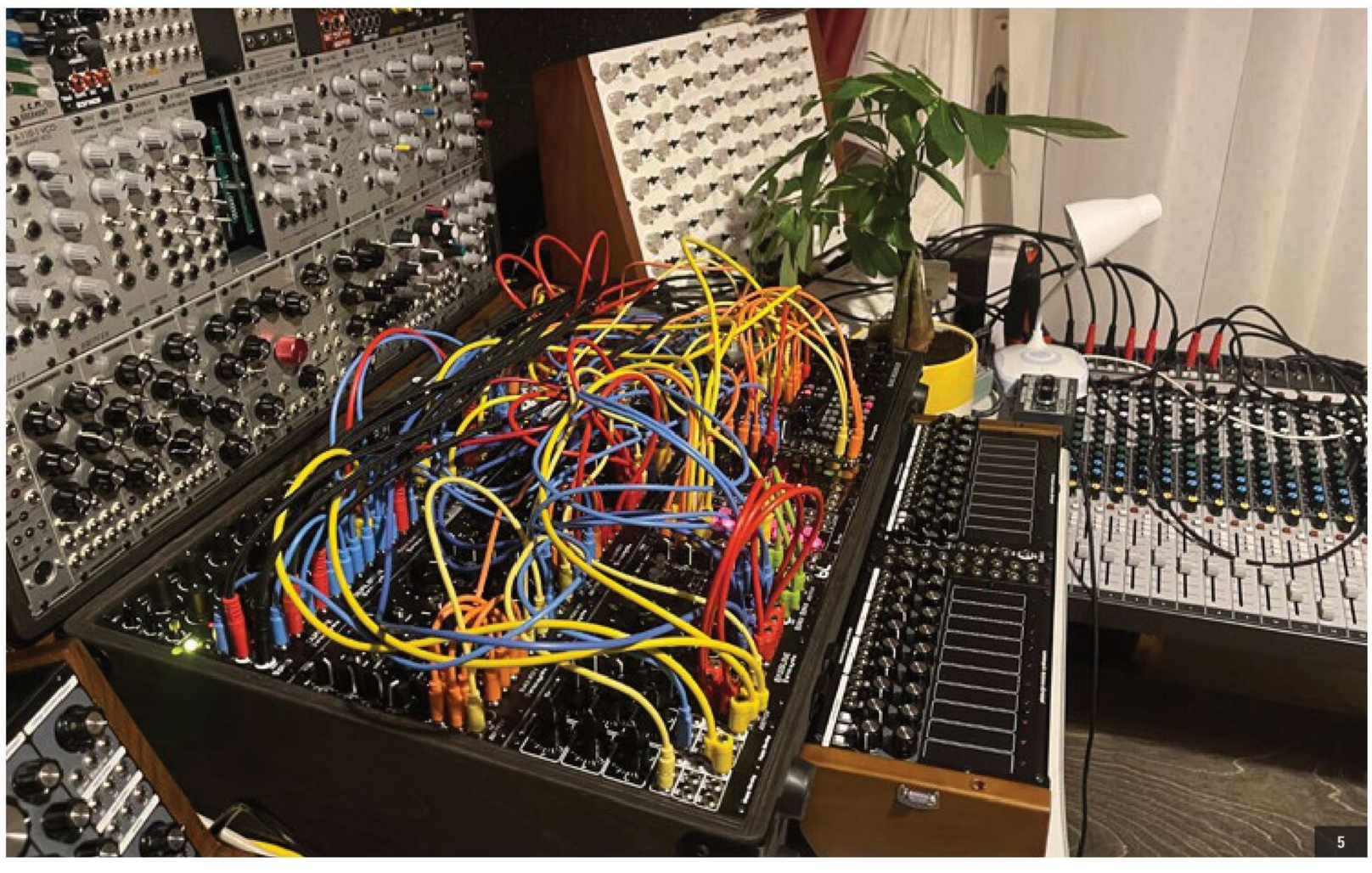

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READER OFFER

Exclusive reader-only limited editions

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C. Visit electronicsound.co.uk/laibach to buy this release on its own for £7.99, but be quick because stocks are strictly limited

Laibach
‘Love Is Still Alive (Surfing Through The Universe)’ / ‘Ordnung Und Disziplin (Müller Versus Brecht)’
Transparent red vinyl seven-inch

This month’s Reader Offer is a limited edition seven-inch featuring two typically idiosyncratic tracks from the always entertaining Laibach

‘Love Is Still Alive (Surfing Through The Universe)’

Spend time with Laibach’s music and you get to expect the unexpected. The band have surpassed even themselves with the A-side of our seven-inch, which features an edit of a 40-minute suite they recorded in 2012 for the soundtrack to ‘Iron Sky – The Coming Race’. It’s perhaps the most surprising piece they’ve ever released. In its full version, ‘Love Is Still Alive’ sounds like an old country tune being covered by Silicon Teens. Our edit focuses on a section imagining a metaphorical collaboration between Suicide and The Doors in outer space.

“It literally came from space!” insist Laibach. “The idea for the sci-fi country love song was triggered by the director of ‘Iron Sky’, Timo Vuorensola, who wanted some optimistic, folk rock party music at the end of the film. Since ‘Iron Sky’ is, in principle, a science-fiction comedy that also refers to other sci-fi films, we decided to go straight to country and western as one of the genres that is the basis of contemporary popular music. We then let the stream of consciousness take us into the cosmic unknown.”

The piece begins with Laibach at their most uplifting, before becoming somewhat less certain as it progresses.

“At the end of the film, after a complete nuclear cataclysm leads to the destruction of Earth and the Moon, a handful of survivors set off on a long journey in an old spaceship,” explain the group. “They are searching for a planet where the conditions would be good enough to start a new life. After the initial joy of surviving the cataclysm, the atmosphere on the ship slowly begins to decline with the realisation that they may never find a suitable planet. Because Earth, of course, is the one and only.”

‘Ordnung Und Disziplin (Müller Versus Brecht)’

Flip the disc over for a track from Laibach’s brand-new album, ‘Wir Sind Das Volk (Ein Musical Aus Deutschland)’, which finds the band continuing a collaboration with German playwright and poet Heiner Müller that dates back to the early 1980s. With ‘Ordnung Und Disziplin’ (‘Order And Discipline’), they dig deep into sound art territory, slicing up and fragmenting vocals, strings, ephemeral rhythms and water noises.

“A collage-style approach is something that Heiner Müller and Laibach have in common,” they say. “We see it as the most accurate representation of reality – a fragmented chaos that humans are constantly trying to define and put into some sort of order and discipline, but we always fail. And this is the only reason why the future still exists. That is why it was our intention to make this fragmental approach sonically and conceptually more *hearable*.”

Heiner Müller often used responses to other writers in his original works. Shakespeare was someone he frequently returned to. As was Bertolt Brecht.

“The history of German theatre pictures Brecht as a father of the epic theatre and Müller as his estranged son,” note the band. “Within the aesthetics of dialectical materialism, Laibach naturally took the empty position of a holy ghost in this triad, connecting both of them into a static totalitarian Verfremdungseffekt – alienation – which is what all three of us have in common.”

The title brings to mind a political or authoritarian means of controlling society, concepts that Laibach have experienced first-hand.

“The Siamese twins of order and discipline represent the necessary systematisation and rationalisation of our chaotic universe and life,” they offer. “They also represent a norm that needs to be violated and transcended. This applies to both the political and the spiritual dimensions of life, to the definition of freedom, and to the creation of art and music. Maybe intelligence calculates order and not discipline. But without discipline, intelligence is just a wild thought.”

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AMP IT UP

Giving the new Mojo 2 DAC a spin

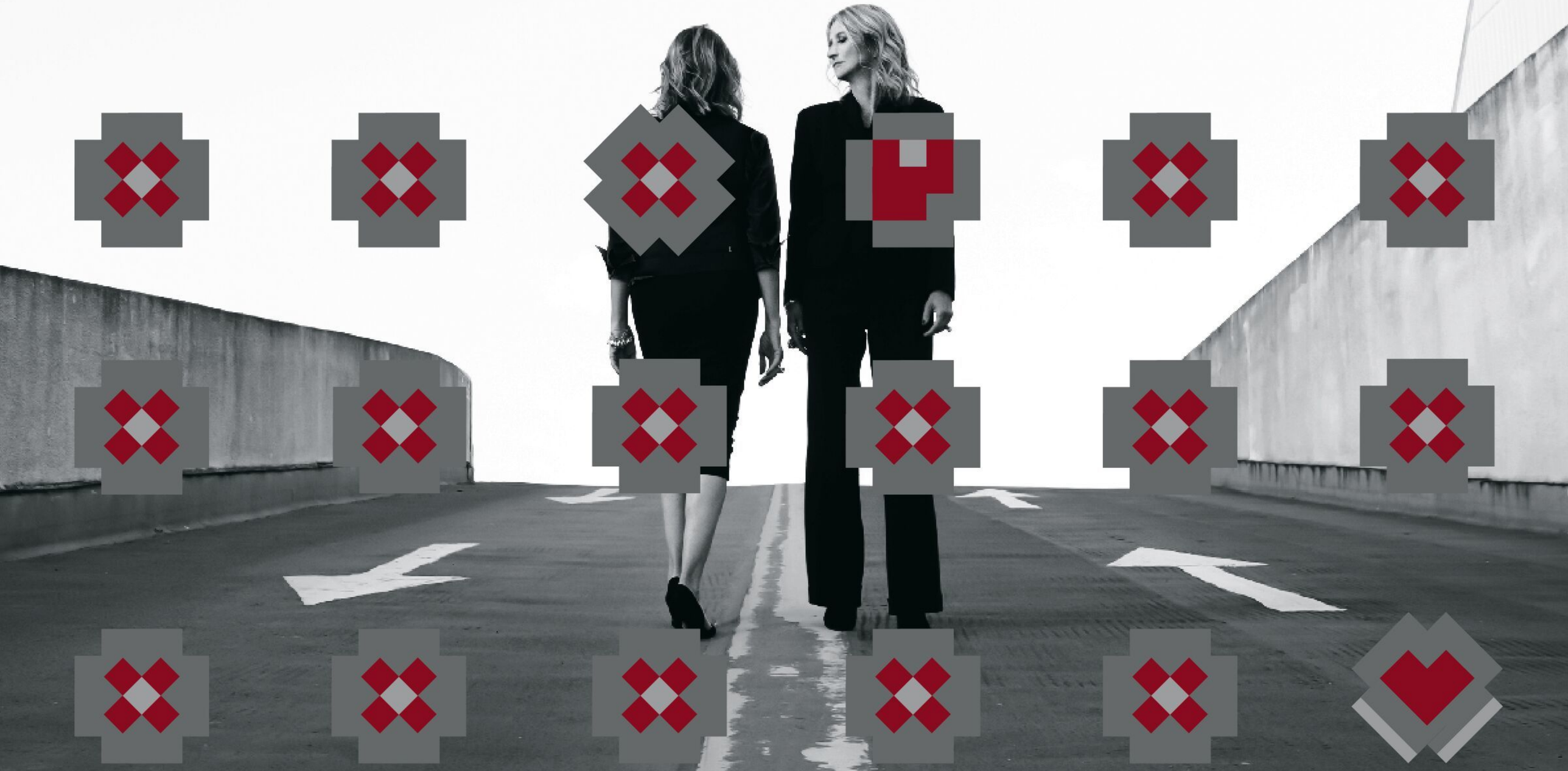
We've long said that if you're listening to music coming off a phone, laptop or tablet, you can only benefit from adding a decent digital audio converter. Sure, everything has a built-in DAC these days, but they're often an afterthought. Chord's original Mojo DAC has been a fixture in our office since it first arrived back in 2015, so we've been keen to get our hands on its follow-up, the Mojo 2.

It looks almost identical to the original model, besides the addition of two more distinctive colourful globe controls (providing a dedicated on/off button and menu button). When you switch it on, the start-up sequence cycles through colours like a mini-rainbow disco.

But it's the UHD DSP on the inside that really wows. We'll iron that out for you. The Ultra High Definition Digital Signal Processor offers 18 steps of adjustment for each frequency banding – low and mid-bass and low and mid-treble – as well as a four-step adjustment designed to provide headphone listening with a spatial loudspeaker-type sound.

We fired up the new Le Cliché album from Polytechnic Youth for a test run. The pounding analogue synth workouts sounded almighty off the bat, more so when we tweaked it via the DSP. Plugging headphones in, we turned everything down first for fear it would take our head clean off.

In addition, there's a new USB-C connection and the unit is backwardly compatible with Chord's Poly streamer for wireless listening. Oh, and there are still two mini-jack outputs, which means you can share just how incredible this special piece of kit is with a friend. They'll thank you for it. Yours for £449. **chordelectronics.co.uk**



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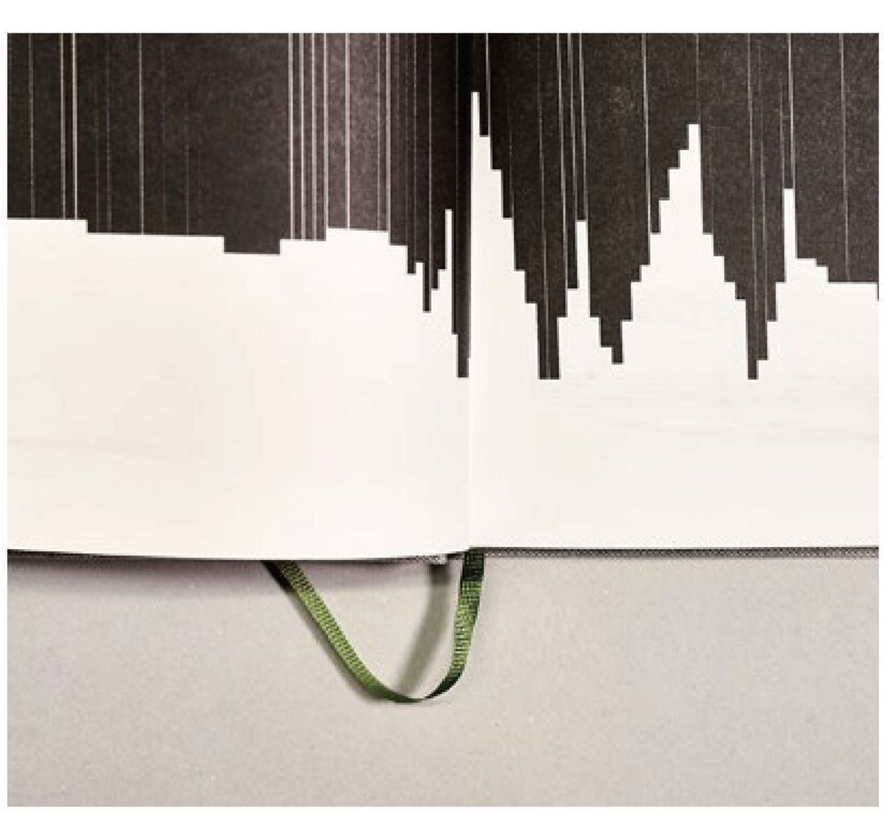
FRAHM NILS WITH LOVE

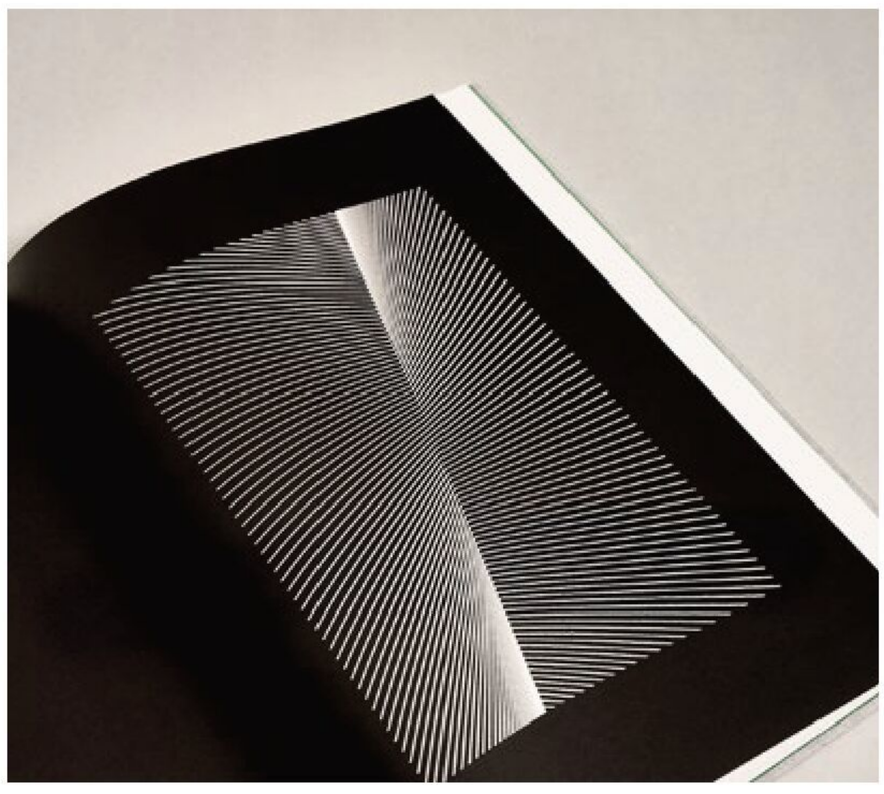
New book by neoclassical maestro

When a product is marketed as a "deluxe artefact", you know what to expect, and Nils Frahm's 'Sheets Drei' certainly meets that lofty description. Released by Erased Tapes, it's a sumptuous hardback book containing 10 pieces of sheet music from the German neoclassical composer, but this is certainly no standard sheet music book.

The 88-page tome features beautiful drawings by Frahm's good friend and multi-disciplinary artist, Torsten Posselt. "The images are part of an exploration of black and white drawings and collages I began developing after the design of your record FELT in 2011," writes Posselt, addressing Frahm directly in the book's heartfelt introduction. "Now that 10 years have passed, I feel it's the right time to go full circle and create artworks that reflect on my artistic preferences, and a simplistic visual interpretation of what I see in my mind's eye when listening to your music."

'Sheets Drei' has a tracklist that includes Frahm standards such as 'My Friend The Forest', 'Sweet Little Pie', 'Frau Delholm' and '4:33', which is actually his tribute to John Cage (but, be warned, it isn't just a blank piece of paper). Pick up a copy now for £60. While you're at it, Erased Tapes have also just released more of their sheet music book editions, including volumes for the work of Lubomyr Melnyk and Peter Broderick. All will look very lovely on your shelves. **erasedtapes.com**





UNDER THE INFLUENCE

Marking her first single in three decades with the 'Love Action'-sampling 'Get Me To The Weekend', **Betty Boo** reveals her formative influences

INTERVIEW: JEREMY ALLEN

SYNTHING FOR THE WEEKEND

"I was a massive fan of The Human League. 'Dare' was one of my treasured albums when I was a kid. I still listen to it all the time, but back in the day I'd fold out the album and study it, touch it, and it felt like something really special. And so I was familiar with 'Love Action' anyway when my writing partner and co-producer Andy Wright suggested the sample on 'Get Me To The Weekend'.

"It was already a really great, dancey, upbeat track which we wrote during lockdown, and when we finally got back into the studio he said, 'You know, 'Love Action' would sound really good in there'. I said, 'Sure, plonk it in, see what happens!'. And it really worked. We tweaked it a bit to make it fit, and that just took it up a notch. It's nice to make a piece that sounds retro but modern at the same time."

DIG YOUR OWN ROLL

"I used to go crate digging when I lived in Chiswick back in the 90s. There was a record shop near me which was tiny, and I would go there and randomly buy stuff to see if there was anything interesting to discover. I was always drawn to different records that had breakbeats in them – Led Zeppelin, Julian Cope's 'World Shut Your Mouth', or an old soul track.

"As rappers, we used to hang around with lots of DJs who would experiment with various breakbeats, or try to find textures in the records to make the music sound more interesting. That's how I got into sampling. You take an obscure 70s Shirley Bassey live album, and then you find something really exciting in there. You could see a bright beat in the vinyl just by looking at the grooves. If the grooves were wide, you knew that there was probably a massive break.

"We didn't have the internet back in the day. Now you'd probably look online or check out a Spotify playlist, but I used to have decks in my studio.

Those were my inspiration. When I started my own studio in my bedroom at home, that was a dream for me because I was able to experiment by recording and listening back to my voice. I could sample beats and loop them, whereas in the past, I'd had to rely on somebody with a drum machine… I was able just to play around suddenly and audition my own ideas. That's really how I evolved."

OLD SKOOL TIES

"When I was in She Rockers, we toured with Public Enemy who definitely influenced me. They showed me that you have to have a strong image if you're going to be an artist. You can't be ordinary, you have to find a way to stand out, and I think I took that advice.

"As a young Betty Boo, I just wanted to be larger than life, dress in a certain way and be cartoony with out-there outfits, so I had spacesuits made and things like that. The 90s have come back in a big way, and I'm very lucky because I've got lots of bomber jackets and trainers!

"De La Soul's album '3 Feet High And Rising' definitely helped me to believe that I could do what I was doing. Making rap sound interesting is quite an art form – anyone can do a bit of talking over a song, but rapping takes time to master, and the fact that they used a lot of samples as well added loads of flavours.

"Salt 'N' Pepa were another big influence, and I don't mean 'Push It' – I'm talking about the 'Hot Cool Vicious' era around 1986. I loved every one of the songs on that album, and they had nice, complicated bars to practise along to. Then there was Big Daddy Kane, Eric B & Rakim… Run-DMC as well, because although they were quite simple raps, the timing on them was so great. You've got to master your trade, so I'd put these records on my hi-fi and think, 'That doesn't sound too bad' or, 'That sounds rubbish'."

HEAR IN MY CAR

"I like writing songs in my car. It can feel like being in a trance, which I know sounds a bit dangerous if you're driving, but let me put that in context. When I've been working at home quite a lot, I like to get out and listen to what I've been doing on my car speaker. Then, ideas can just come quite naturally because you're not trying too hard. It's almost like singing along to the radio… you might ad-lib something and think, 'Oh, that's quite good'.

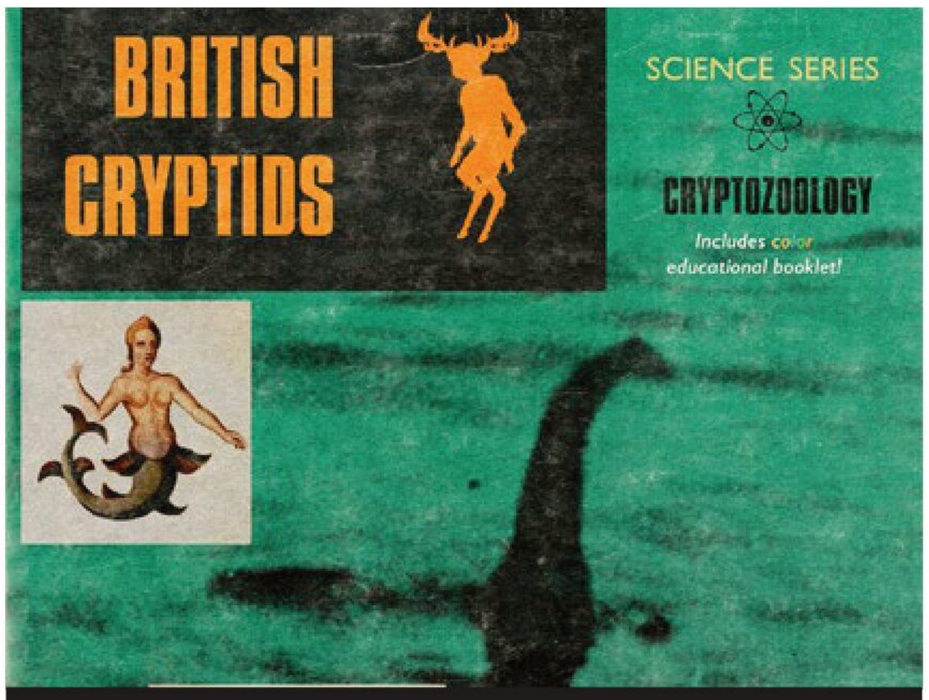
"During lockdown when you were only allowed one person in the supermarket and there were massive queues, I'd say to my husband, 'You queue up and I'll wait here'. So I'd be in the car for an hour and would use the time wisely. It's how I came up with some of the ideas for songs on my forthcoming album. Often I'd be able to find that last little piece of the puzzle, and I can only put it down to being in that trance really. Our garden's nice, too. When you don't have any ideas it's sort of like a blank page, so I'm able to take myself off and think in another way."

40-LOVE ACTION

"I play tennis every day, sometimes twice a day. I love it. Hitting balls really helps my mental health, and if I don't play, it affects how I carry on throughout the day. I'm on court at 9am every morning, and sometimes I'm back in the afternoon with a coach. I've been doing it for 25 years or so, and my club in Wiltshire is a very nice, normal club. It's not particularly posh, but it's got lovely courts, lovely coaches and lovely people.

"Everyone has something that makes them feel better – it might be cake for some people. I just like being outside, getting some fresh air and knocking balls around, and then I feel I can take on the day."

'Get Me To The Weekend' is out now on Betty Boo Records. An album is set to follow in the autumn



PULSE

AUX LUNA

Attic conversions with cryptic Midlander

WHO THEY?

Shropshire tinkerer Alexander McCloughlin, *apparently*. "After my mum died, I found a large cardboard box in her loft, full of books and magazines about the paranormal," he claims. "They didn't belong to her or my dad, so I don't know where they came from. There was a page from a catalogue and it had a cheap version of the old View-Master 3D photo viewer, made by a company called Aux Luna. They don't exist anymore, so I used the name and their logo for my project."

WHY AUX LUNA?

There are now three Aux Luna albums, with McCloughlin layering loops, toy instruments and fizzing ambience over extracts from dusty analogue tapes also discovered in said box. These tapes, which were simply labelled "Hannah" when he found them, contained disintegrating, mono recordings of unidentified guitar and hissy piano recitals. "Some of the magazines in the box had the name 'Shepherd' written on them and I thought that may have been written by the newsagent to reserve them," he continues. "So I assume Hannah was the daughter of someone called Shepherd who used to buy these magazines. Hannah Shepherd? I've searched online, but never found a likely candidate."

TELL US MORE...

New album 'British Cryptids' also incorporates plummy-voiced snippets from what purports to be a previously unbroadcast 1974 schools TV series of the same title. They're on YouTube, for anyone seized by curiosity regarding the "Yorkshire Yeti" or the "Hereford Twiggywitch". The album makes for a wonderfully disquieting experience, redolent of both windswept, haunted heaths and bum-numbing school halls haunted by the spectres of long-lost Spam fritters. But McCloughlin remains modest. "No matter how I subsequently develop the music, it's forever inspired and haunted by Hannah," he concedes. "Whoever she was..."

BOB FISCHER

'British Cryptids' is out now on Whinny Moor

NEEDS MUST

Freewheeling through time and space, **Kris Needs** continues his adventures in sound. This month: Underground Resistance

As this is the final Needs Must I'll be squirting our departing commissioning editor Neil Mason with after eight years of spraying him with all sorts of bollocks, I thought I'd swivel my trouser telescope back to one of this column's earliest obsessions – Detroit's Underground Resistance.

Illustrating the delirious paper trail of my life collecting records, this stemmed from celebrating underrated prince of todger techno Blake Baxter last month. I like to think I have a fairly robust collection of UR tackle but, checking Discogs, discovered that Motor City techno's ultimate bunker squad released a seven-inch single in 2003 called 'Transition (Acapella)' / 'Windchime'.

The A-side features the unaccompanied positive extrapolations vented by Christa Robinson ("Mad" Mike Banks' Submerge Distribution co-founder), UR's press voice Cornelius Harris, and DJ Dex (Dan Caballero) from the previous year's 'Transition' 12-inch release, which had taken the untouchable UR sound to further ecstatic realms. It's flipped by an edit of Mike's exquisitely resonant 'Windchime', which would later spring fully extended as UR-054 (co-habited by Perception's fabulously evocative 'Abandoned Building In Mono') in 2004.

Stuff like this entices the unashamed trainspotter from deep within my battered soul like a reawakened rhino's stiffy – tracks crafted with love, released on their own terms in assorted couplings. This particular love triangle prodded a peek at the epic UR interview I conducted in 2005 that got slashed to bits by another magazine. There was Mike explaining why UR had reintroduced seven-inch 45s at a time when electronic dance music was lodged up its 12-inch-obsessed arse.

"Essentially records are expensive!" he explained. "At UR we make tools for the underground. Grimy, small sweatbox clubs where record volume and precision big studio sound is not a requirement so much as soul is! In my opinion, our 12-inch records simply cost too much, due to rising manufacturing costs... and many domestic releases were much cheaper than our imports, so to compete we dropped the seven-inch which gave us the traditional 'a lotta bang for notta lotta money'-type value for our brothers and sisters in sound. Thanks to Ron Murphy at National Sound for innovating how to cut a HOTT seven-inch, our records can compete sonically with most 12-inch records at a cheaper price."

Then I stumbled on a 2003 seven-inch of 'Tobacco Ties' / 'Spacewalker' by The Martian. A Red Planet 45! If I get stranded on a desert island with just a loincloth and a gang of lop-eared rabbits, these fabled UR-affiliated releases will form my dying soundtrack.

Good luck Neil! Thanks for putting up with me for the last eight years!

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GARRETT MILLERICK PLUS **THE VIP VILLAGE HOSTED BY DISTRICT**

SATURDAY 23

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YARD ACT · PORRIDGE RADIO · LONELADY · ALEWYA · INDIA JORDAN
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DAVID OLUSOGA IN CONVERSATION WITH JON SAVAGE · MONICA GRADY
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IN THE CLUB

Book rewards for Third Kind subs

Any subscriber to the Third Kind Club – from Brighton's Third Kind Records – will tell you that the £12 monthly subs fee is a small price to pay, given that it guarantees you every vinyl, cassette and members-only release, interviews, podcasts, T-shirts – and now books, too. The label's latest offering, 'The Third Kind Annual', is a colourful tome featuring a variety of contributions from Third Kind's regular collaborators.

"For a few years," says the label's Nick Langley, "I'd been thinking about doing an exhibition featuring Third Kind's visual artists, since it's clearly a major part of what we do, and we had a lot of work to potentially use for a show. But it was looking expensive to do that – and then, for global reasons, it obviously became less viable."

The 40-page hardback features interviews with Andy Fosberry, Rupert Lally, Hattie Cooke and more, providing insight into how each artist operates. "It goes into quite a bit of detail about artists' working methods, backgrounds and philosophies," explains Langley. "There's a lot to cover so there should be another one next year… and more books in general, actually!" Sign up now to get yours. **thirdkindrecords.bandcamp.com**

URBAN DECAY

Spitfire enlist south London avanteur Gaika

Forward-thinking software instrument developers Spitfire Audio have teamed up with Gaika to create 'War Island', an expansive sound library and virtual instrument inspired by the producer's Brixton upbringing. Ranging from darkwave synth drones to glitchy vocal samples and dystopian atmospherics, these expansive industrial synthscapes form part of Gaika's 'War Island' anthology, which features an audio-visual installation, sample library, film, writing, technology and a full soundtrack – the latter due for release at the end of April.

"My records have been described as the sound of the memory of the club, as opposed to being really direct dancefloor music," says Gaika. "People tend to come to me because they want all of this cinematic, ambient stuff in their own records. The more I've grown as a composer, the more I've really leaned into that." Download the pack now for £29. **spitfireaudio.com**

TIME MACHINE

We travel back to the good old days of pirate radio and meet **Luke Owen**, the man behind a new collection of quirky between-song adverts that used to fill our illegal airwaves

WORDS: BEN WILLMOTT

More likely than not, the words "field recording" summon up an image of the music producer at play in nature, microphone in hand as they attempt to capture the sonic essence of babbling brooks or far-off thunder, ready to give their latest ambient extravaganza a bit of originality. But there is a more anthropological, human side to the art which is just as long-standing. From the 1930s, Alan Lomax famously helped to preserve the folk and blues traditions of the US for future generations, creating a unique, instant window on the times in which they were created.

Which is very much the purpose of a series of releases emerging this year on London label Death Is Not The End. 'London Pirate Radio Adverts 1984-1993 Vol 1' is a fascinating collage of dozens of different advertisements specifically culled from pirate radio in the era prior to the massive boom in illegal stations that came with jungle, drum 'n' bass and then grime.

Many older readers will remember adverts for underground events that you'd never hear of anywhere else, which seemed not only to flourish, but pack out massive venues way off the beaten track. The album's opening ad, 'Do You Remember?', recalls the legendary Genesis raves and their various venues, which mythologised otherwise drab and glamour-free locations like Slough and Blackstock Road in north London, and encouraged ravers to ring a special phone line to record their memories of this alternative music history. Equally interesting are those more idiosyncratic parties – the Leyton-held 'School Reunion', which names the extensive list of schools and colleges invited, or the Bow event with DJ Hype, locatable through the admirably functional identifier 'Next To Tescos'.

"There are a lot of events," says Luke Owen, proprietor of Death Is Not The End. "Audio flyers for raves and rare groove parties and reggae nights – that's a large part of it. But some of my favourites are menswear shops, video rental shops… and the thing that I was most amused by were dateline services, for people looking for a female raver to go on a date with.

"There are a few of those on the album, and it appears that the stations were running their own. It's funny because as someone who only knows early rave culture through the internet and books, you get the impression that everyone was too pilled-up to go out shagging, but actually it seems as if they were well up for dating."

The fact that small, mainstream businesses were advertising their services on these niche stations was testament both to their popularity and the lack of other alternatives.

"As a media style it's pretty much dead now," says Owen. "There are still a few adverts on big pirate stations, but if you're a small independent retailer then you're going to go on Instagram or somewhere similar to get your business known."

With the rave connection, we'd assumed that Death Is Not The End is named after the seminal early rave album of the same name by Shut Up And Dance. Not at all.

"Nor is it a reference to the Bob Dylan song," laughs Owen, whose day job is with leading underground music distributors Kudos. "It comes from an old gospel tune."

His label's Bandcamp page reveals an extensive catalogue of found sound and field recordings, blues, gospel, folk, some pre-1950s stuff and even the tape-based experiments of one Tiger Lily Hutchence Geldof.

Owen's interest in pirate stations came from his upbringing close to the St Paul's area of Bristol, the traditional home to the city's ethnic minorities and its pirate stations.

"I'm 35, so that would have been the late 1990s and early 2000s," he recalls. "So it was Full Cycle, Roni Size's label, the full jump-up jungle era and the beginnings of grime. You used to pick up all the local pirate stations – there were lots of reggae pirates, you'd get three or four that were on regularly."

He initially immortalised those days just over a year ago, with a tape compilation of Bristol stations of the 1980s through to the early 2000s.

"The idea was a slightly hyperbolised timeline of the time I spent living in Bristol, with snippets of music, DJs and tunes, but also chatter and ads. It was me just taking extracts of broadcasts and cutting between them as if you were turning the dial. Put a little bit of static in there and switch it up. It was rather slapdash, but it worked."

It proved popular and was followed by a request from a mix blog called Blowing Up The Workshop.

"That's when I started diving into pirate radio archives online, on YouTube and Mixcloud, all the sorts of places where people were uploading mainly for the DJ sets, obviously. People recorded pirate radio for the DJ sets, not for the ads. Most of the time with those mixes, it's just straight music. The ads have either been edited out or cut somehow. But I was more interested in what goes in between the music, the chat and the adverts, and I wanted to document them."

Research into the roots of pirate stations threw up some interesting facts, like the concept of "needle time" where legal stations back in the 60s were forced by labels to only play part of a record. Pirate stations played them in full, and eventually legal stations followed suit. Owen also sought help from various authorities on the subject – Wayne Anthony (promoter of the Genesis raves and author of the acid tales bible 'Class Of 88') provided some recordings, as did writer Simon Reynolds.

So while it might seem like rather an odd jump for a field recording archivist, the parallels are clear in Owen's mind.

"I quite liked the idea of nostalgia through sound and there's a definite link between crackly 78s and the static on the radio. I guess the common factor running through Death Is Not The End is a) field recordings and b) low resolution recordings!"

'London Pirate Radio Adverts 1984-1993 Vol 1' is out now on Death Is Not The End

FISHERMAN'S FRIEND

The story of a curious tattoo led to the short film, 'Sail We Must', perfectly illustrating the **Andrew Weatherall** ripple effect

WORDS: ISAAK LEWIS-SMITH

When Andrew Weatherall died in February 2020, one phrase became a parting mantra for many who were mourning on social media – "Fail we may, sail we must". These words had been tattooed up the inside of Weatherall's forearms. While repeating them could do little to ease the pain or lessen the shock, you felt that it was an adieu the Guv'nor might have approved of – a salute, an acknowledgement that the show would have to go on without him, but that his spirit could be there with us at each of our respective helms.

Where Weatherall first came across the phrase was a bit of a mystery. In interviews, he mentioned hearing it from a young fisherman he'd met in Cork, who had regaled him with seafaring tales while driving the producer to a gig in Galway. But none of the interviewers had pushed Weatherall for additional details. It left a few people wondering – who was this mysterious fisherman? And what did he know about Weatherall's tattoo?

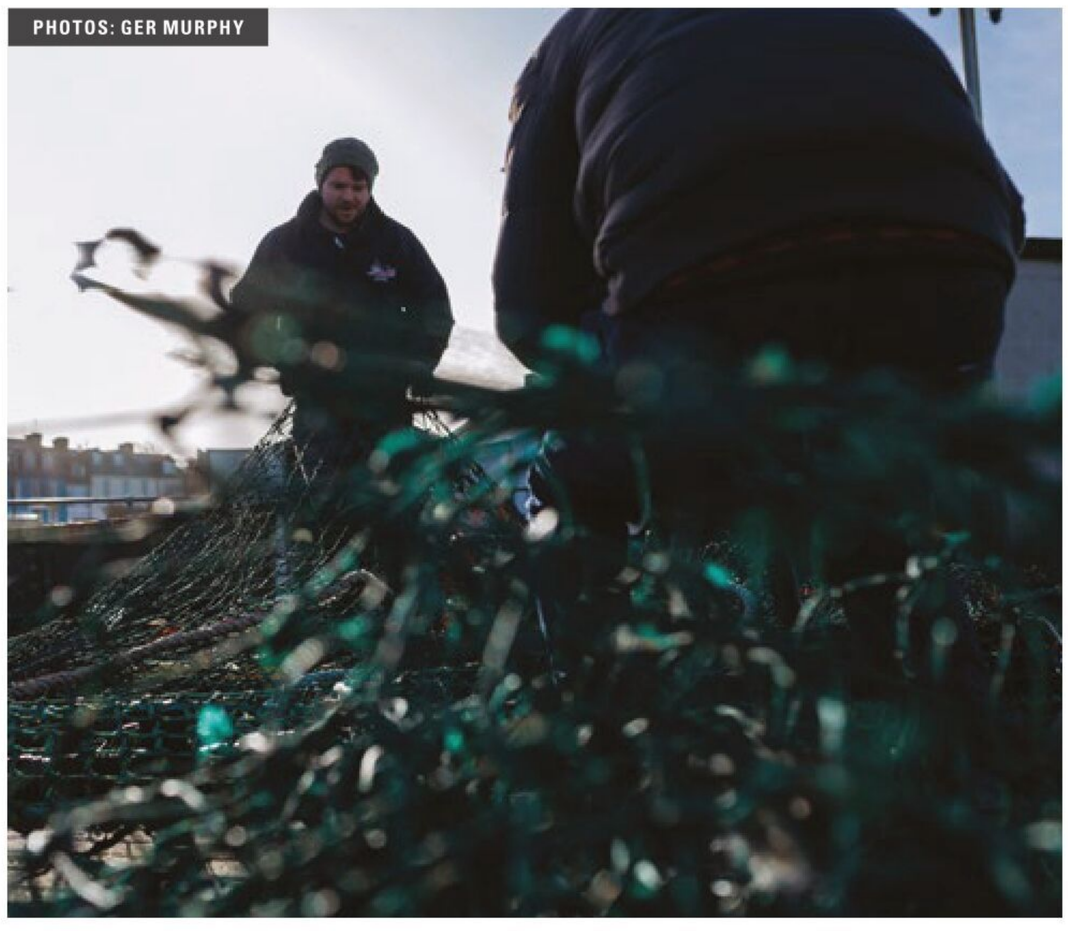
Enter Eric Davidson and Richard Seabrooke of Dublin creative agency, The Tenth Man. Back in February 2021, they reached out to Cian Ó Cíobháin, the DJ who had booked Weatherall to play the Galway gig. Ó Cíobháin shared their intrigue, and duly sent out a rather hopeful tweet – "Does anyone know who the Cork fisherman is in this #Weatherall story & when it happened?".

Not long after, Ó Cíobháin's phone started buzzing with tenuous leads, while others echoed his curiosity. And then a guy named Billy Cummings replied, saying the man was a friend of his. His name was Gerard Sheehy, and he was up for talking. The only problem was that he was currently somewhere in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean.

"We were going back and forth on WhatsApp for a while," recalls Davidson. "He was sending us unbelievable images of the sunset in the fucking Atlantic, videos of him out in gales with winds howling around 20-foot waves. It completely flipped my understanding. I was thinking, 'He's out at sea so we won't hear from him', but Gerard was like, 'Nah, I've got Instagram and WhatsApp. You know, I'm not a pirate!'"

While they waited for Sheehy to return, Davidson and Seabrooke got the green light from the Weatherall estate to make a film, which was released in February this year under the title, 'Sail We Must: A Sea Story Of Andrew Weatherall & An Irish Fisherman'. Directed by Rua Meegan and Trevor Whelan, the latter remembers informing his brother, a huge Weatherall fan, about the project when it was in its early stages.

PHOTOS: GER MURPHY



"He gave me quite a harsh warning," explains Whelan, "telling me there's such loyal and quality fans of Andrew, and that nothing has been done like this before. If it's done wrong, it'll go down very badly. So there's a lot of responsibility on you guys to get this right."

Although a meeting with Sheehy was scheduled, Sod's law meant that Davidson caught Covid just before, forcing him to miss the 10-hour round trip from Dublin to Baltimore, a little fishing village in County Cork with a population of roughly 350. But when they finally met Sheehy, he exceeded all their expectations.

We won't give away any spoilers, but suffice to say that 'Sail We Must' is a heartwarming watch. Alongside archive recordings of Weatherall, plus interviews with Sheehy, O Cíobháin and the late producer's close friend and collaborator, Sean Johnston, the film acts as a brief meditation on why Weatherall touched so many people, and what his chance encounter with Sheehy might reveal – ostensibly because Weatherall and Sheehy's lives could not have been more different. One was a music producer strutting around east London in a tweed suit, while the other was hauling catch in the Atlantic for four months of the year, not knowing Beck from Bach.

Davidson chuckles as he remembers a Q&A session from the film's launch party in Dublin, when an audience member asked the panel, "Did you know that Andrew loved fishing so much?"

"I was kinda like, 'I think you got the wrong end of the stick there', but it led to an interesting conversation, because Cian said, 'Andrew didn't just love fishing, he just loved anything different, anything that he could find out something about'. He sounded like an incredibly curious person, in terms of the books he read, the music he ingested and digested, and also the people he spoke to."

When Sheehy unexpectedly walked through the doors that night, and Davidson met him for the first time, the unlikely union between Sheehy and Weatherall made complete sense.

"On the night of the launch, the event officially ended at 11pm, but I found myself there until about half one, on my fourth pint of Guinness in the smoking area, still speaking with Gerard," recalls Davidson. "Sean Johnston spoke about how you couldn't walk down the street in east London without Andrew stopping to talk to shopkeepers, homeless people, musicians and this vast array of people. I think that's really the parallel between the two, and their sense of curiosity."

As our conversation draws to a close, Whelan, in an offhand sort of way, neatly summarises the moral of the story.

"The weight that our words can carry to each other…" he muses. "No one understands how what you say has such an important meaning to others."

You can watch 'Sail We Must' on YouTube.
For more, visit thetenthman.com

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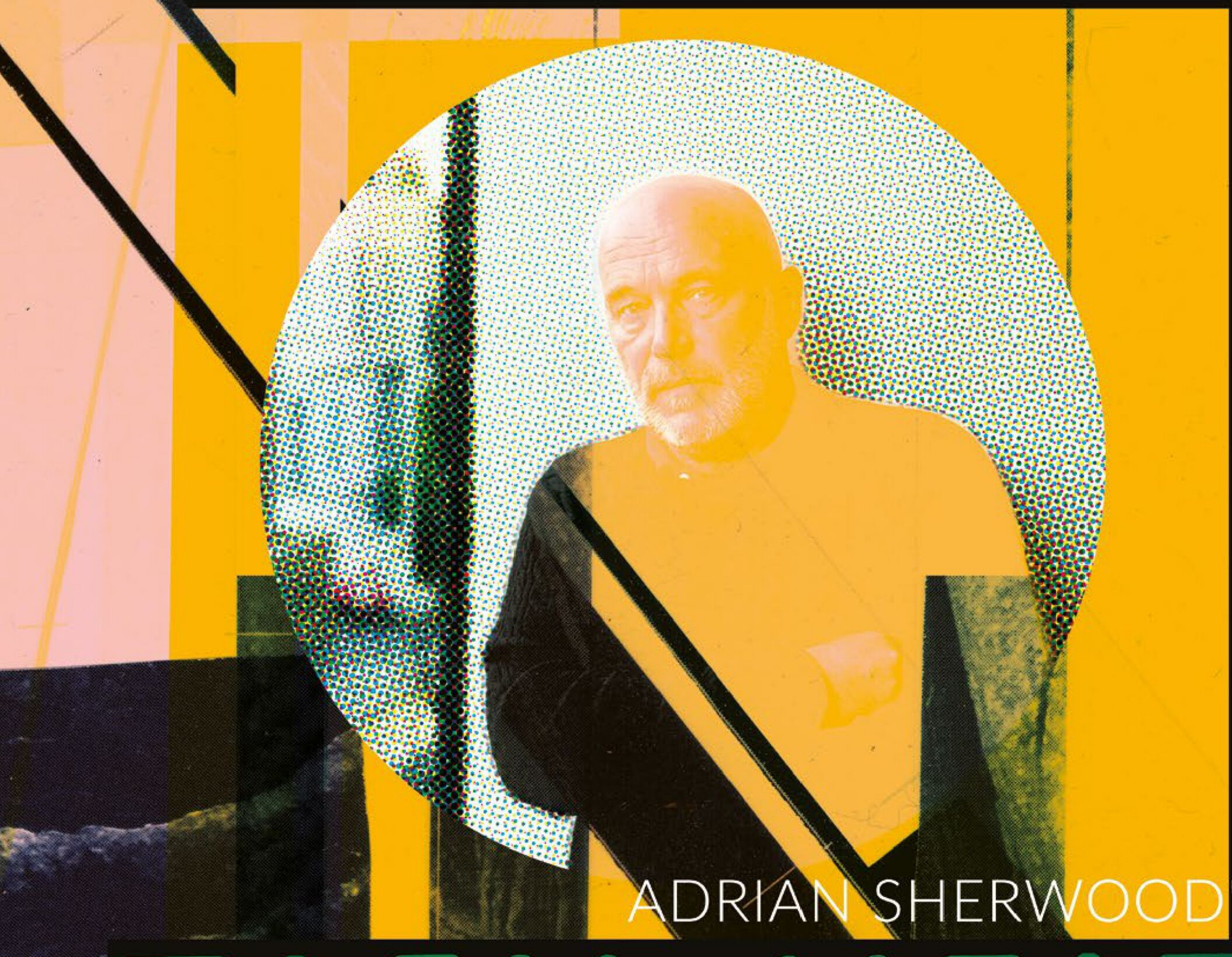

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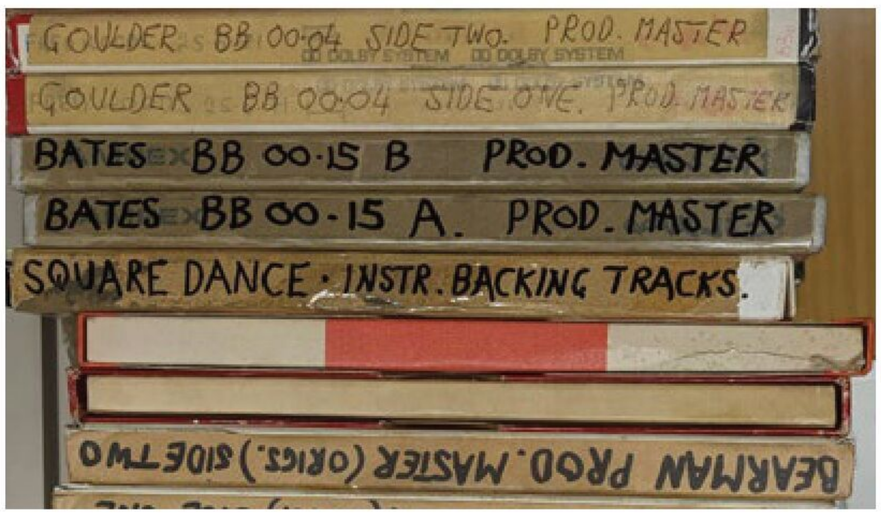
SOS

The British Library's Save Our Sounds project aims to save UK recordings from extinction. **Andy Linehan**, Curator of Popular Music, digs through the archive's priceless audio treasures. This month: Michael Eugene Steyn



Mike Steyn was born in Cape Town, South Africa, in 1931. As a child he showed a natural talent for music and was self-taught until he won a scholarship to attend the Guildhall School of Music in London, where he studied composition and conducting. His talent for the latter took him to Berlin to continue his study and he subsequently worked with both the London Philharmonic and London Symphony orchestras.

Opportunities in the classical world proved scarce, however, and in the early 1960s with a wife and young child to support, Steyn became conductor for the West End musical production of 'Oliver!'. Ultimately, he became frustrated with this role and embarked on a career as an independent record producer, learning his trade at the folk label Strike Records.

Before long, Steyn set up his own company, Big Ben Records, whose first release in 1967 gave an indication of the eclectic nature of its future catalogue. 'Laughter With A Bang' was a recording of humorous anecdotes by Cheshire comedian and professional demolitions and explosives expert "Blaster" Bates (who went on to record more than a dozen hugely successful albums for the label).

Many other titles in the folk tradition followed – 'The Music Of Machinery: Volume One Shrewsbury Pumping Station', a field recording of a steam-driven sewage plant in action, 'Requiem For Steam – The Railway Songs Of Dave Goulder' featuring Martin Carthy on guitar and Maddy Prior on spoons, albums of Scottish folk dances, the seven-inch EP 'Square Dance Time' by Tommy Cavanagh And His Country Cousins and an LP by Roy Harper, 'The Sophisticated Beggar'.

Steyn used the profits from his early hits to form Tangent, another record label. Here he ventured into world music, releasing albums of traditional Ethiopian, Scottish and Ghanaian music and compilations from the Islamic world. He released an LP of audio poems by the avant-garde French poet and experimental musician Henri Chopin and an album consisting entirely of sounds made by different types of glass by the New Zealand sound artist and composer Anna Lockwood.

In the early 1990s, Steyn returned to classical music. He died in 1999. A collection of his tapes including production masters for Big Ben and Tangent was donated to the British Library and these recordings have now been digitised as part of the Save Our Sounds programme.

For more about Save Our Sounds visit bl.uk/save-our-sounds

APPLE OF MY EYE

Paying tribute to Synclavier inventor, Jon Appleton

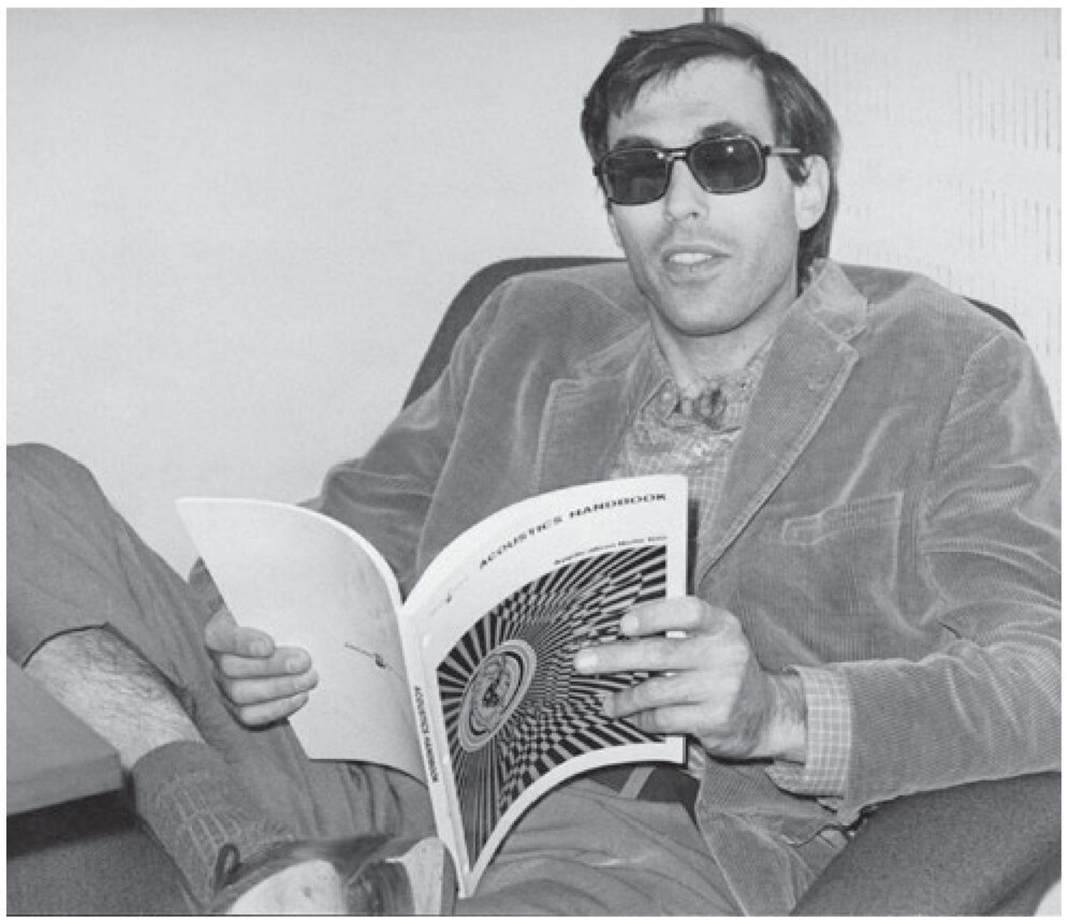
There's a chance you might not have heard of Jon Appleton, who passed away earlier this year at the age of 83, despite his contribution to the evolution of electronic music being arguably as pivotal as that of Bob Moog

Born in California in 1939, Appleton was among the first wave of American composers to make pioneering electroacoustic music in the 1960s, using effects to warp and reshape natural sounds and field recordings.

In 1967, Appleton started working at Dartmouth College in New Hampshire, where he later helped develop one of the earliest digital synthesisers – the Synclavier – alongside Sydney A Alonso and Cameron Jones.

Aside from being a tremendous FM instrument, the Synclavier was a crucial step in popularising digital sampling, and was used by luminaries such as Laurie Anderson, Trevor Horn, Tangerine Dream and also Suzanne Ciani, who utilised its sound effects for the popular Xenon pinball machine in 1980.

The Synclavier was employed extensively on Michael Jackson's 'Thriller' too, while the makers of Ableton Live cite it as a key influence. Paying tribute, Ted Levin, an ethnomusicologist from Dartmouth and a friend and colleague of Appleton's, said that he "was at heart a kind of musical romantic… he regarded his electronic music as a kind of folk music for our age". Find out more about his life and work at **appletonjon.com**

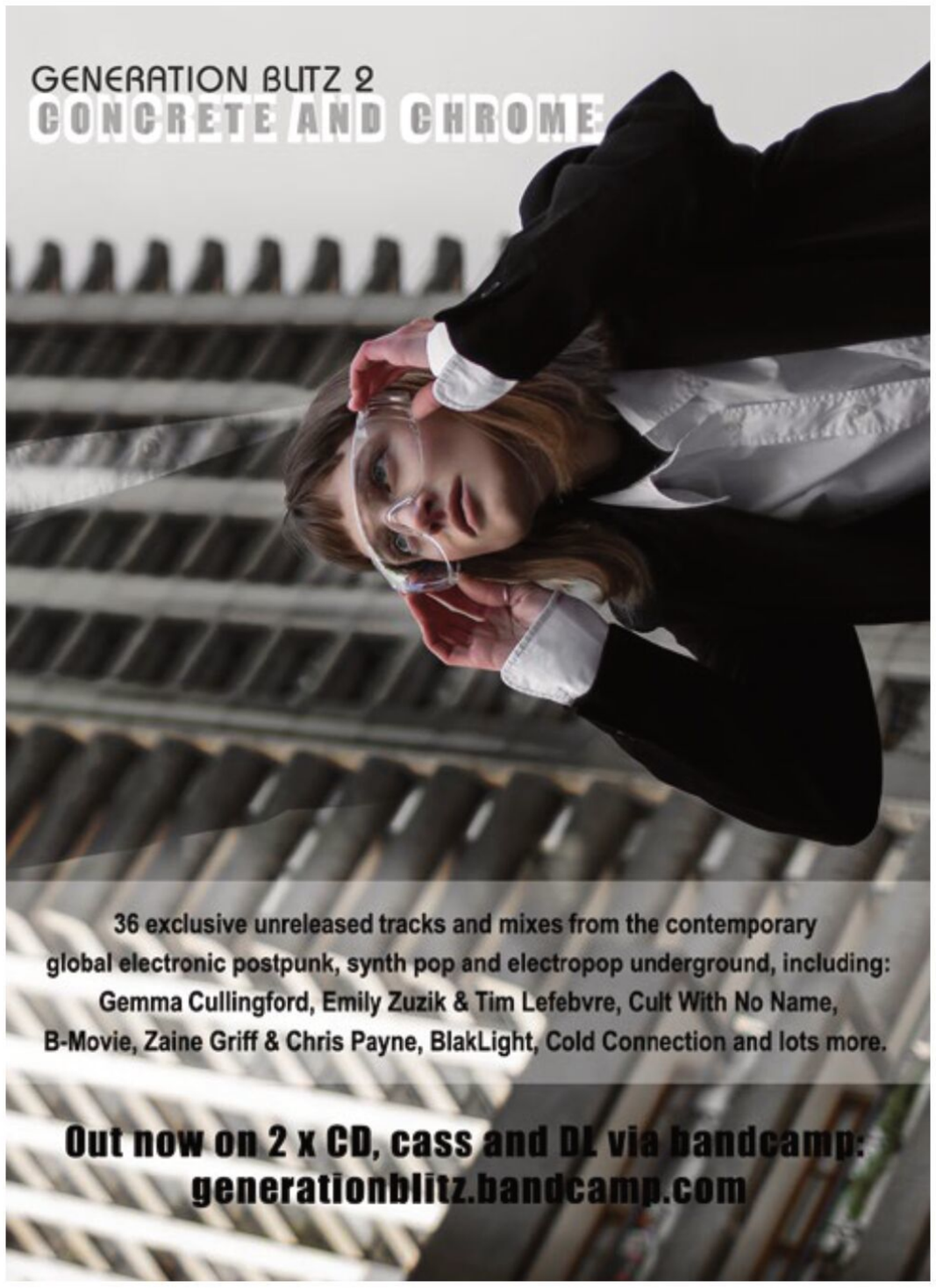


CREATIVE ACCOUNTING

Ireland opts to pay musicians a basic income

While British creatives might be suffering under the country's most artistically detached government in decades, in Ireland things are looking a little brighter. In January, Catherine Martin, the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sports and Media, announced the Basic Income For The Arts scheme, which will offer a basic payment of €10.50 (currently around £8.80) an hour for people working in the arts, to encourage them to pursue their creative work.

In a pilot scheme starting this spring, income will be paid for a period of three years to approximately 2,000 musicians, artists, actors and other performers. Martin has called it a "once-in-a-generation policy intervention", aimed at helping creatives whose careers were brought to an abrupt standstill by the pandemic. Though specific terms are yet to be finalised, and the pilot scheme will reveal the true benefits of such a system, it's a step in the right direction. Find out more information at **gov.ie**



PULSE

KINCAID

Musical magpie keeps it in the family

WHO THEY?

Kincaid is Londoner Joe Arthur who has been blipping on our radar for a while. His genre-hopping adventures for a raft of labels include mashed-up Tackhead-like electro and textural downtempo-ness for Bristol labels Futureboogie and Banoffee Pies respectively, left-field dancefloor bangers on Berlin's Aeon as well as broken techno for hometown imprint Well Street.

WHY KINCAID?

On his new six-tracker, 'More Good Than Bad', Joe dons an avant-garde soundscape hat, and a dandy one it is too. Written knee-deep in lockdown, he says that tracks like the frantic, skewed drum 'n' bass rhythms of 'Sudden Shifts In Perspective' and the deliciously melodic broken ebb and flow of 'Slowly Breaking Away' are the sound of "a catharsis with different issues". A deeply personal work, he also says it offers up "samples of memories featuring family and friends that relate to specific places and moments". It's a rich listen for it.

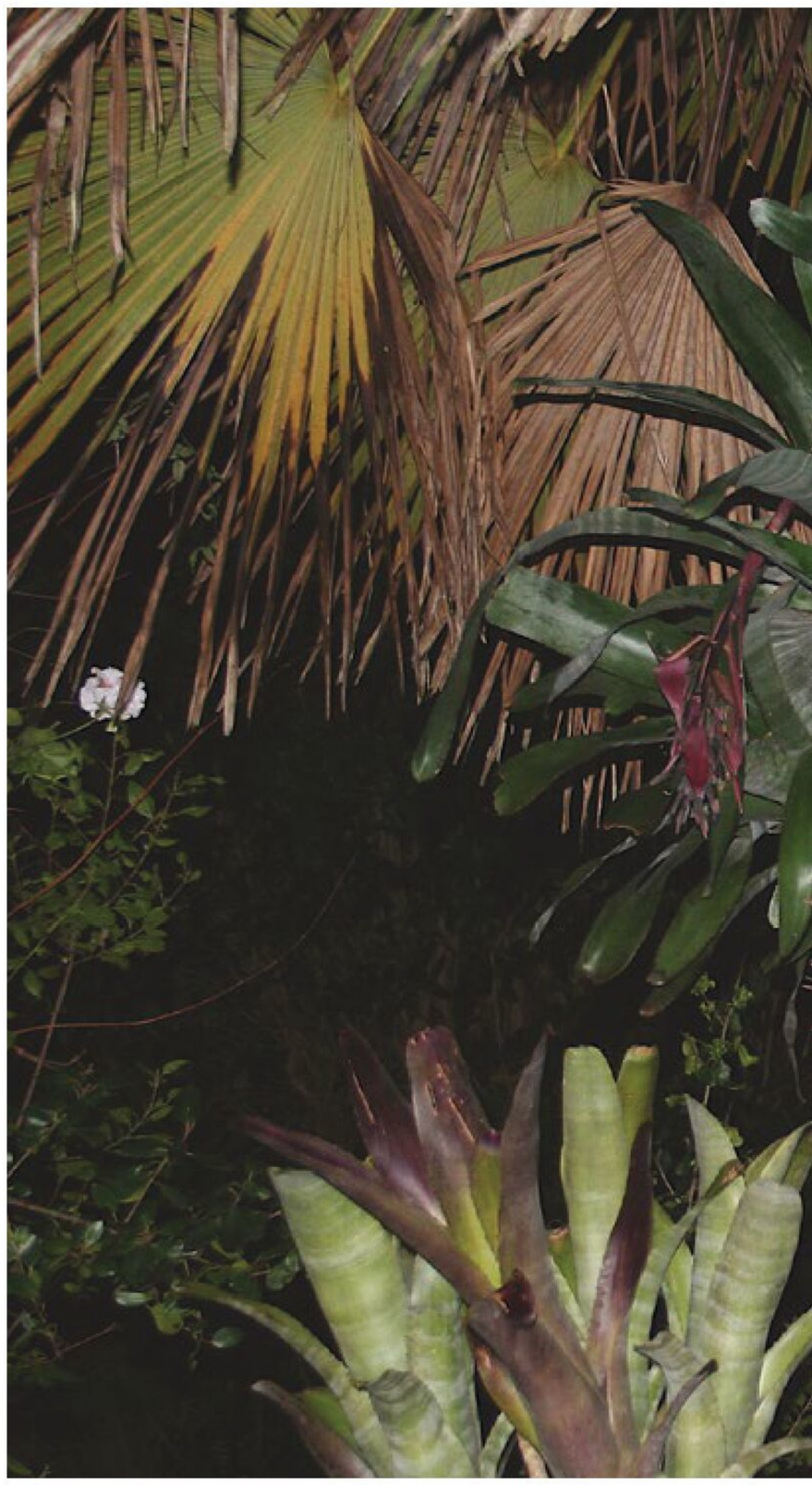
TELL US MORE...

Well, Joe comes from fine musical stock. His old man is… Blancmange's Neil Arthur. While father and son are very much ploughing their own musical furrows, there is the same level of like-minded sonic curiosity on show. It makes perfect sense then that they have collaborated. Their adventures as Kincaid Featuring Blancmange are well worth hunting down. There's the 2019 floorfilling 'Big Fat Head' single (on Moscoman's Disco Halal label) and the 2020 'Late For Sum' mini-album (on Neil's Blanc Check imprint). The latter collects Joe's remix work for Blancmange and is topped off by a new piece, the dystopian title track. Insert your own happy families joke in here.

NEIL MASON

The 'More Good Than Bad' EP is released by Grid Records on 29 April

LANDMARKS



Pete “Sonic Boom” Kember talks us through the making of **Spacemen 3**’s 1991 showstopper **‘Big City’**

INTERVIEW: WILLIAM STOKES

“Two of my favourite songs ever are ‘Neon Lights’ by Kraftwerk, which I bought when it came out on luminous 12-inch vinyl, and ‘Heart Of Glass’ by Blondie, which I also bought around that time. There was a 12-inch disco remix of it, a kind of dubbed-out, trippy version. I loved those two records. They had different qualities but were both really evocative for me. I just had some instant connection to them.

“The Kraftwerk one was particularly awesome because you could charge up the luminous vinyl by putting it on top of a lamp for five minutes, then put it on the turntable, turn all the lights off and just watch the thing, with that song playing out of it and your own little piece of neon there.

“When the whole MDMA thing started happening in the late 70s and early 80s, bands would do these extended things for 12-inch, and it wouldn’t usually be done by any named remixer. It’d be done by the same person who did the mixing or the production on the original. But I really liked them. I like that era.

“So when it came to ‘Big City’, I thought I’d make something in that vein. Sort of an MDMA track with that ‘Neon Lights’ vibe, a bit like David Bowie’s ‘Heroes’, where it’s… I don’t know, happy-sad. Nostalgically happy. I do like to do something every now and then where you’re projecting a real wellness-y vibe.

“It’s only me playing on it – it’s the only track on ‘Recurring’ that’s like that. It’s pretty robo. The machines were working overtime on that one. It got used recently on the show ‘Succession’, that kind of HBO, big-budget thing. That’s not my type of show, but when they used ‘Big City’ in ‘The Simpsons’… now that made my day!

“You can try and analyse ‘Big City’, but there’s almost nothing to it. It has lyrics that get repeated a lot – a few choice phrases that people can relate to. It’s also influenced by two other songs with the same name. The intro of it – “Big city / Bright lights / Cool cool people” – is from a song by Dandy Livingston called ‘Big City,’ which is totally different but had that intro. And I was like, ‘I’m going to fucking ref that’. The song is awesome. Dandy Livingston is fucking amazing.

“And then, there’s another song I love deeply, ‘Big City’ by the mid-60s psych band The Electric Prunes. When I heard the line, ‘Everybody I know can be found here’, in that song I was like, ‘Oh, my god, that’s so awesome’. It has such a resonance to it. So those bits came from those places. It was plundercore! The whole, ‘Yeah, I love you too’ line, and ‘Let the good times roll’ – all those things, if you’re on MDMA you’re just like, ‘Yes!’. I do think some of the biggest progressions in music usually are to do with drugs.

“The original beat used either the ‘Pop’ or the ‘Rock’ or the ‘Dance’ button on a Casio SK-1. It had a ‘Fill’ button, which I held so it was doing this skippy fill the whole time, and then I put that backwards. Sometimes you’re fucking around and you just get lucky. Some songs just generate their own certain life force.

“It’s strange… I guess everything I’ve ever done – certainly in Spacemen 3, but I think always – has been an attempt to keep a fairly minimal set of parameters. If you analyse most of my songs, they’re incredibly simple. Mostly an illusion, I would venture. I feel like one of my knacks is to take almost nothing and make it sound like something unusual or appealing. But if you work the chords out, actually analyse it, it won’t take you long. I like that accessibility.

“In Spacemen 3, we definitely wanted each record to be different. We wanted to keep those intrinsic parameters that we felt were part of it,

but we didn't try to make records that just sounded like the last. There was a thread between them, and some songs that spoke to other songs, but on the whole, each time we were trying to do something new.

"At the end, with 'Recurring', personally I felt that if the stuff had been more threaded together it would have made for an exceptional record. Because the strength of having two people like me or Jason Pierce in the band is that you keep it fresh and the whole thing keeps moving. It's clearly sympathetic, but it stops it from sounding all the same on one side and then all the same on the other side, rather than having this more woven thing. For me, the way you put tracks together on an album is one of the most interesting parts of the whole process and the evolving flow is very important.

"But you know, as a band we were just collapsing horribly. We had been for a while, really. Without grinding my teeth too much about it, sadly that's the way it was. In hindsight, I wish we'd dealt with things in another way. And, speaking for myself… I wish that we'd had some better guidance. Maybe that wouldn't have been enough. Perhaps I just needed to be more mature! It's a funny law that people in a certain type of band tend to be a little dysfunctional.

"When me and Jason first started doing stuff, the main bands we really loved only had three or four albums, like The Velvet Underground, The Stooges and MC5. They got to not leave a nasty sounding corpse. I do not celebrate the way it happened at all, but when we couldn't figure it out we just needed to call it a day. So, I'm not unhappy about the whole thing. I always say, 'I never wanted to make a lot of records, I just wanted to make good records'."

BOXING CLEVER

A highly impractical way to hear John Grant

Who fancies a quirky version of John Grant's 'Marz', the second track from his acclaimed debut album 'Queen Of Denmark'? Well, lookie here… in typically off-the-wall, Grant-esque fashion, you can now bag yourself a limited edition 'Marz' music box. With music arranged by Jon Trier (who has played with Richard Hawley), each box also comes with an individually numbered first edition postcard – there are only 500 of these, so look sharp. And if John Grant isn't your cuppa, fear not. The Official Music Box Company has an array of singles-cum-boxes, including Soft Cell's 'Tainted Love', The Charlatans' 'The Only One I Know' and Doves' 'Reprise'. Just £15.95 each. You know what to do. **theofficialmusicboxcompany.com**

BASS VALUE

New project explores black music in the UK

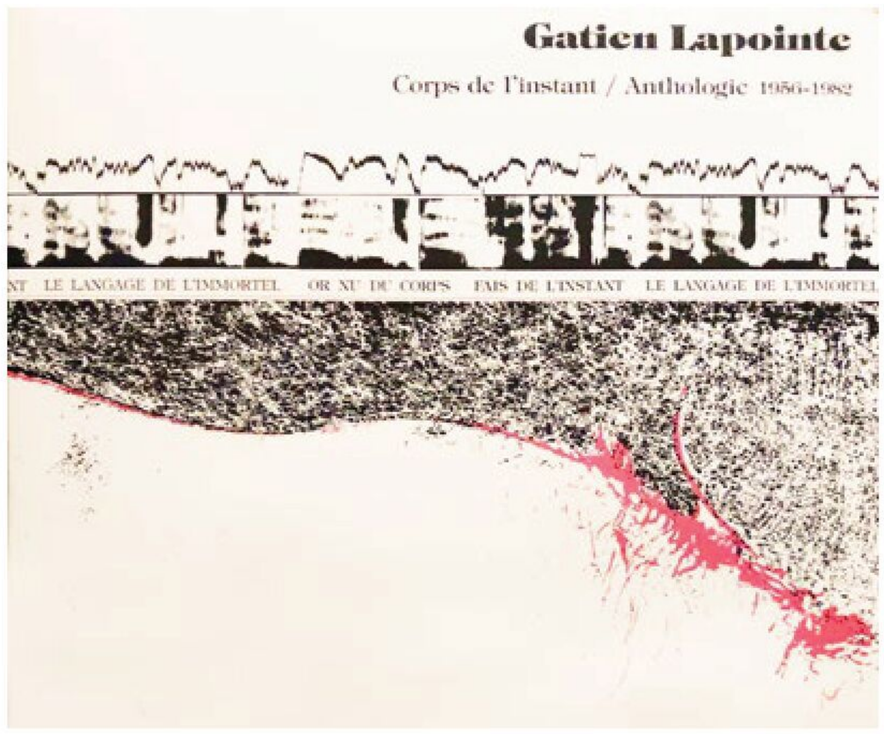
The British Library and the University of Westminster are joining forces to develop a landmark exhibition exploring the history of black British music. The exhibition, due to open in 2024, builds on the brilliant 'Bass Culture' research project undertaken by the University of Westminster's Black Music Research Unit, itself a response to "the disengagement and lack of education surrounding the heritage of Jamaican and Jamaican-influenced music in Britain over the last six decades".

Hailed as the first major study of its kind, the project has captured memories, experiences and ephemera from three generations, revealing a direct line from the pioneering British soundsystems of the 1960s to more contemporary artists such as Soul II Soul, Goldie and Tinie Tempah. This new partnership will also use the British Library's collections to chart and reframe the evolution and influence of black British music innovation, culture and creativity.

"We cannot change the past," says BMRU director Mykaell Riley, formerly of influential roots reggae outfit Steel Pulse, "but we can use history to impact the present and influence the future." For updates, go to **bmru.co.uk**

SCHOOL OF ELECTRONIC MUSIC

Resident archivist **Jack Dangers** listens to the French poetry and musique concrète of Gatien Lapointe



The back cover of 'Corps De L'Instant / Anthologie 1956-1982' has a photo of Gatien Lapointe looking very relaxed in front of a Moog modular system. But it's the only record the French-speaking Canadian ever made, and he wasn't responsible for the music. He was a poet. This album, which was released in 1983, is a type of musique concrète, mixing sound and electronics with poetry.

Its genre on Discogs is given as "Speech, Rhythmic Noise, Poetry", which is fairly accurate, though it's actually more musical than this description suggests, with abstract synth lines and familiar Moog burbles and blurts under Lapointe's narration of his work.

The concept of sound art was basically a French invention. Pierre Henry and Pierre Schaeffer made musique concrète radio plays with actors doing the narration, and this piece follows in that tradition. The music is really good, and I wonder how they approached it. Did Lapointe just book a nearby studio and ask the engineers to create musical/musique concrète pieces around his readings? If that's the case, they did an excellent job.

It was recorded at Le Studio Vert, which was a standard commercial studio, rather than an experimental electronic studio from what I can find out. Owned by Pierre Tremblay and Michel DeBloies, it was the first MIDI-equipped studio in Quebec, apparently. Pierre Tremblay is co-credited for the music on 'Corps De L'Instant / Anthologie 1956-1982' along with engineer/producer Quentin Meek, and Maurice Jacob. Tremblay is credited as the engineer on several of the records made there by Canadian pop bands, as is Meek, but Jacob seems to have left no trace other than this record.

An important figure in Canadian poetry, Lapointe's first anthology was published in 1953, and in 1969 he became a professor at Université Du Québec à Trois-Rivières. Before he accepted the invitation to teach there, he asked the university to fund a small publishing house to release the best of his students' work. He called it Écrits Des Forges, and from 1971 it released anthologies a couple of times a year. It also served as the record label for 'Corps De L'Instant / Anthologie 1956-1982'.

Lapointe died in 1983, aged just 52, and there is a library named after him at Trois-Rivières. The Écrits Des Forges imprint continues to publish poetry, and even put out a couple of CDs by French poet André Velter in the 1990s – 'Le Grand Passage', and 'Ça Cavale' with music by Jean-Luc Debattice.

HOLLISTIC

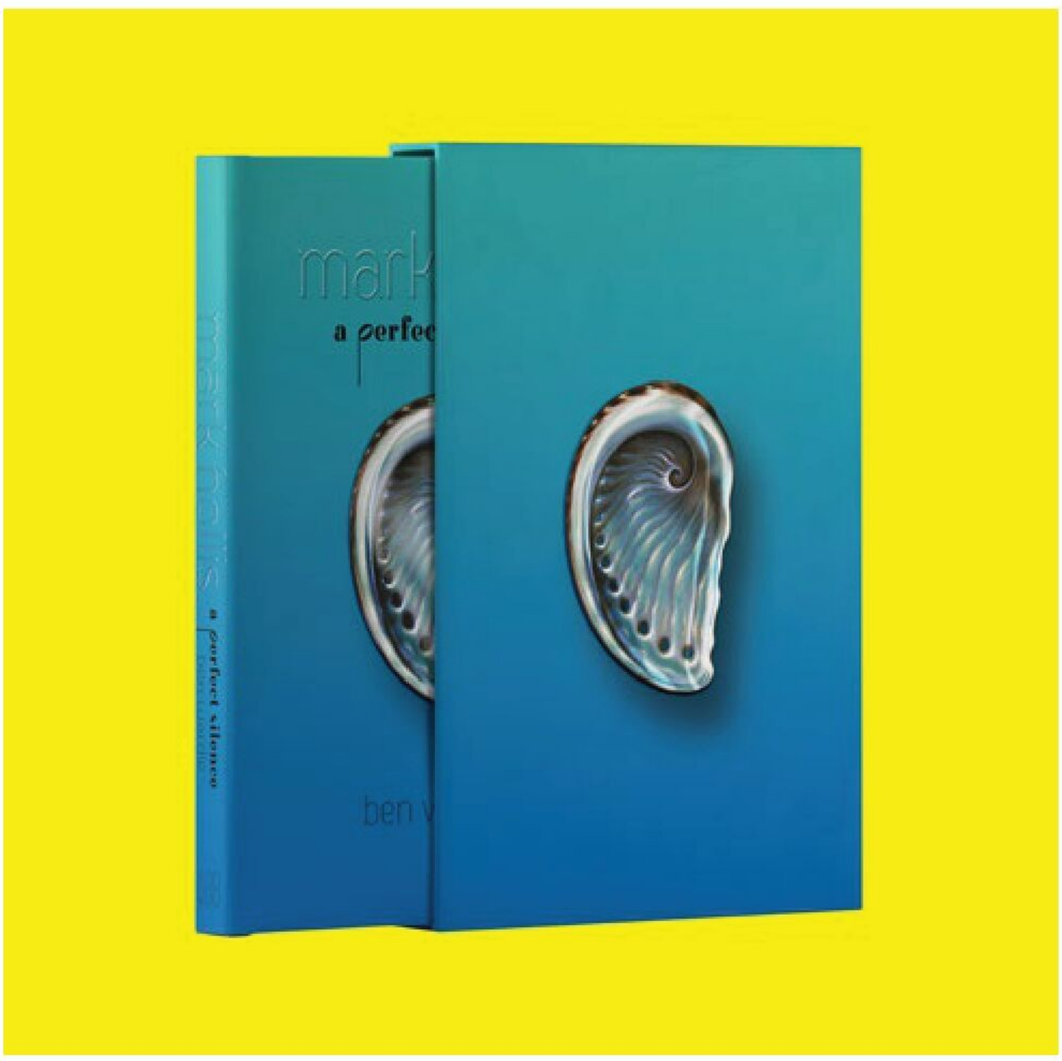
Much-anticipated biog of Talk Talk's Mark Hollis

Talk Talk fans are in for an unprecedented trove of discoveries with the release of 'A Perfect Silence', the first full-length biography of the late Mark Hollis. Penned by author, academic and former A&R man Ben Wardle, and published by the venerable Rocket 88, the book endeavours to fill in the gaps of Hollis' enigmatic life, from boyhood to his untimely passing.

"Some readers may not wish to have their enjoyment of the artist marred by discovering that he was, after all, flesh and blood," writes Wardle in the introduction. "This book is not for them."

Well aware of the magnitude and sensitivity of his undertaking, the author consulted a litany of sources and those who were there along the way, from producer Paul Epworth, recalling his work as a young tape op on Hollis' solo opus, to Talk Talk art designer James Marsh, who has further lent his stamp of approval by producing the artwork for the bio's cover.

"A number of people think it's a poisoned chalice," Wardle tells us, "that no one from the family is talking, that people from the band are all sealed up… 'Who the hell is this guy who thinks he can write a book about Mark Hollis?!' In many ways, that's the elephant in the room that I wanted to dispel. I definitely wanted to give a three-dimensional picture of him." 'A Perfect Silence' is now available to order as a regular £30 edition, or a £60 special edition, signed by both Wardle and Marsh. **markhollisbook.com**



DECKS APPEAL

The Derbyshire company renewing turntables

Got a Technics turntable? After decades of hard use, is it ready for an upgrade? If your deck is a 1200 or 1210 model, look no further. For £1,750, the audiophiles at Inspire Hi-Fi in Chesterfield will give it a full MOT with their bespoke Technics Upgrade package. It's very simple – just send them your turntable (they can also collect it, which costs extra) and they'll kit it out with all manner of new bits and bobs, including but not limited to an off-board hi-spec power supply, a re-engineered platter, a new arm plate of your choice, plinth system… you get the idea. They upgrade Thorens, Xerxes and other turntables, too. If you want to give your deck a proper overhaul, without getting the entire thing replaced, it's a no-brainer. **inspirehifi.co.uk**

IVORY TOWER

Time for a key change

Future Piano Ltd is the trademark for the world's first "standing grand". Founded in 2016 by respected pianist Sarah Nicolls (formerly of Alexander's Annexe, alongside the late Mira Calix, and David Sheppard), it's quite literally a vertical grand piano, with the strings going straight up from the keys.

Far from just an imposing space-saver – it weighs a paltry 82kg, compared to your typical 450kg grand piano – Nicolls says she's also driven by bringing upright playing, typically viewed as an experimental approach, into the mainstream.

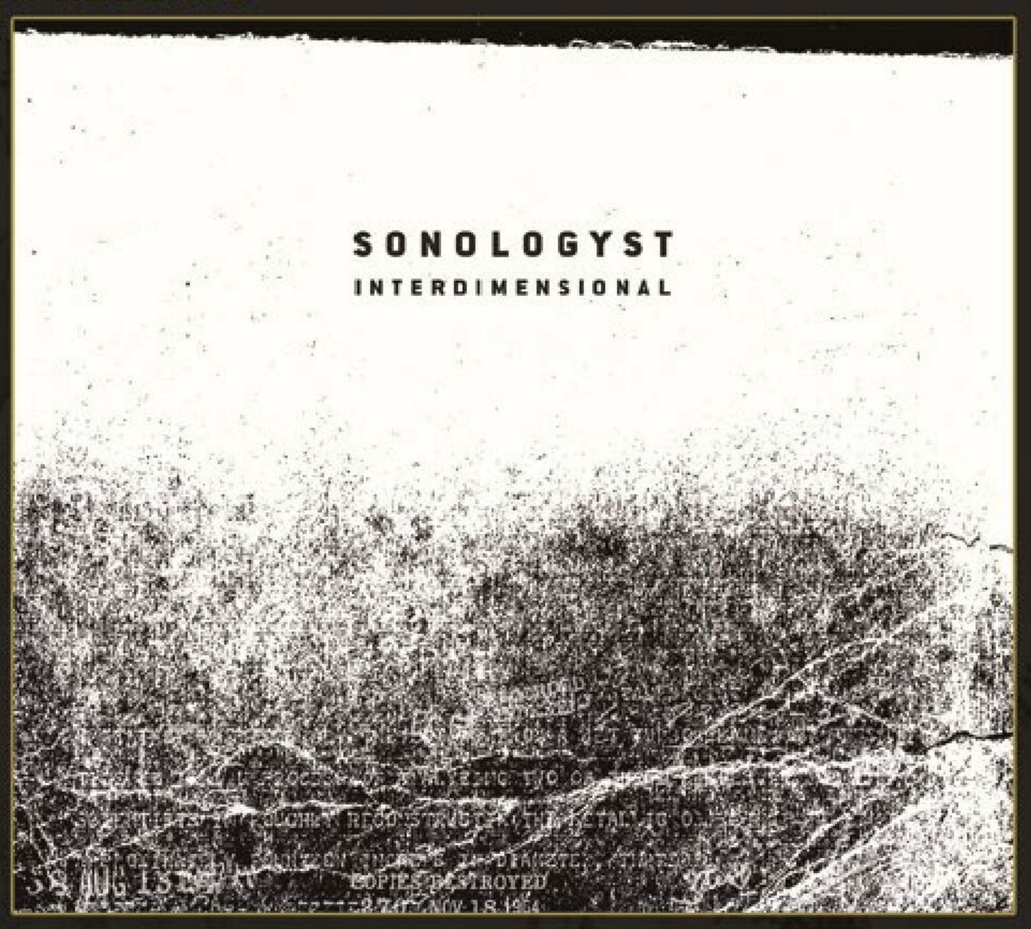
"My aim," she explains, "is to bring playing directly on the strings into reach, to help people make atmospheric textures and unusual sounds whilst playing the keys. 'Inside' piano techniques have been used for over 100 years, but are still considered experimental… and physically uncomfortable!"

After a difficult couple of years – you can probably guess why – Future Piano are nearing the finish line, with renowned builder David Klavins currently constructing the final design from his studio in Latvia. Want to hear when a model becomes available? Join their mailing list at **futurepiano.co.uk**

COLD SPRING PRESENTS

TENHORNEDBEAST 'THE LAMP OF NO LIGHT' CD

Pounding Doom-Ambient from C. Walton (ex-Endvra), with ultra dark textures and heavy drones. A sonic veneration of the 12th c. medieval Doom Stone housed in the crypt of York Minster. The deeply-carved sculpture depicts the torment of the damned in Hell. Without darkness, the light is meaningless.



SONOLOGYST 'INTERDIMENSIONAL' CD

An album exploring the paraphysical dimension of cosmic music, inspired by what is beyond the boundaries of science. Isolationist Dark Ambient / Cosmic Drone reminiscent of Thomas Köner, using electrified instruments, analogue synthesizers and recordings of resonant metal objects.

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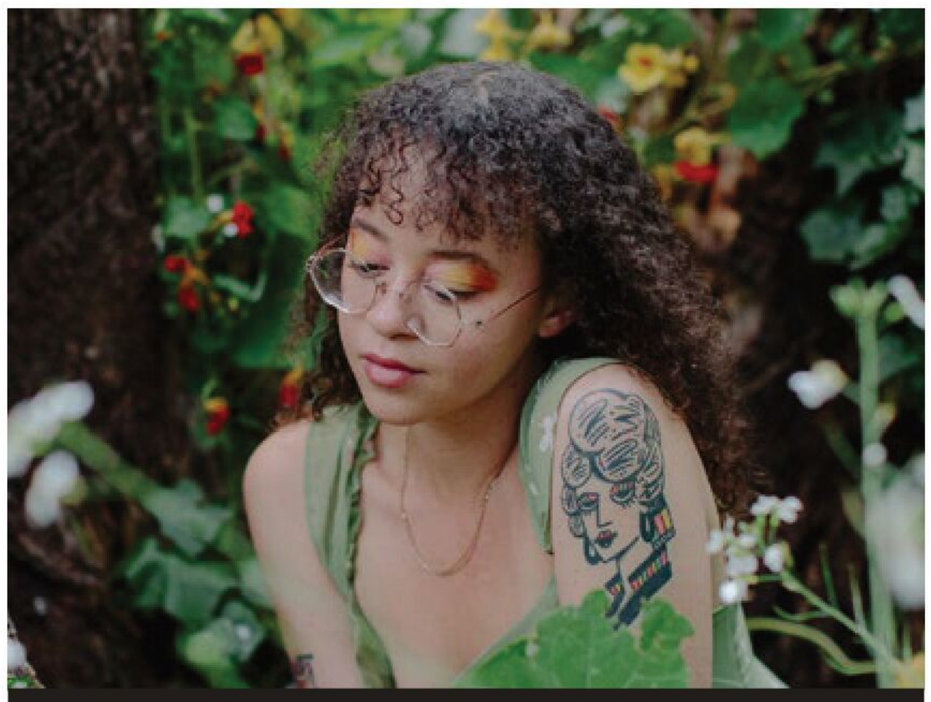

PULSE

XYLA

Genre-twisting Bay Area hitmaker

WHO THEY?

Three years ago, you had better odds finding 26-year old Alyx Henderson in a concert hall than a club. She left Houston in her late teens to study French horn at San Francisco's prestigious Conservatory of Music, but a mild existential crisis resulted in her taking an "Intro To Ableton" elective. As Henderson's first dalliance with electronic production, it was a lightning bolt moment. She quit her job and relocated to Berlin for an after-hours education in music, and by the end of 2019, was celebrating the release of her debut single, a funky rework of DJ Gant-Man's ghetto house classic 'Juke Dat Girl', on San Francisco's Leaving Records.

WHY XYLA?

We had to wait two years for her debut full-length, but it was everything you hoped it might be. Released in October 2021, the eight tracks on 'Ways' tie together opposing strands of music. Syncopated footwork rhythms wind around melancholic ambience, while muddy acid gurgles and gut-busting breaks dart between a litany of jazz samples and nostalgic R&B vocal samples. It transfigured the dancefloor as a space for introspection. After enough people like me shook their fists at Leaving Records to demand a vinyl run, we were duly rewarded, and they have now almost sold out. Bag one while you still can.

TELL US MORE...

After another year-long hiatus, Xyla has finally returned with new single 'On & On', again released on Leaving Records. More of an out-and-out banger this time, with fewer compositional permutations and less cross-genre pollination. While the beat hits a clearer four-to-the-floor rather than the jerky footwork, it's right at home on your springtime playlist. Xyla is probably a name you're going to hear more of in the coming years, and we'll all be better off because of it.

ISAAK LEWIS-SMITH

'On & On' is out now on Leaving

GOOD VIBRATIONS

Electroacoustic drone machine is sonic treasure

Made over two years by Cypriot artist Mihalis Shammas, the Lyraei is a one-of-a-kind electromagnetic string instrument. Described by Shammas as a "hybrid" that bridges the worlds of modular electronics and chordophones (instruments such as harps, lutes, lyres and zithers), the Lyraei generates magnetic pulses which "excite" its strings and oscillates them continuously before amplifying the sound via a set of handmade pickups. Shammas says we should think of it as a "string-synth".

"I'd been playing stringed instruments since I was a kid, until eventually I started to create my own," he continues. "After getting into electronic music, and especially drone, I envisioned a string instrument that could be played like a synthesiser to create continuous sounds."

The Lyraei creates a rich bed of resonant drones, somehow sounding both metallic and warm, with the player sitting cross-legged, yogi-style, on the floor. "When playing, one can shape the magnetic pulses with precision, or allow the signals to flow into each other in unpredictable ways," Shammas explains. "These complexities in its circuitry are reflected in the textures of its sound, as the strings are constantly wavering between chaotic motion and natural resonance. Musically speaking, the sound of many artists served as an inspiration, including Sarah Davachi, Kali Malone, Eliane Radigue and Phill Niblock." **mihalisshammas.com**

MIRA CALIX, 1970 - 2022

Groundbreaking Warp artist dies aged 51

We were deeply saddened to hear of the recent death of Mira Calix, the experimental electronic producer celebrated for her complex, playful and uniquely creative music.

Born Chantal Passamonte in Durban, South Africa, in 1970, Calix moved to London in the early 90s to pursue a career in music, working first in cult record shop Ambient Soho, then as a press officer for Warp Records, she became one of the first women to be signed to the label.

Since the release of her debut album, 'One On One' in 2000, her practice has explored multidisciplinary performance work, as well as composing for theatre and film. Her recent album, 2021's 'Absent Origin', was her most accomplished and impactful work yet, a vibrant and politically charged sound collage of club sounds, field recordings and samples.

Speaking to Electronic Sound about the album last year, Calix emphasised the global narratives and collective energy that went into its making. "I'm an open-borders person. I've had the privilege of being in different places and working with different musical traditions," she explained. Her desire to "connect people", as she described it, was not only a defining characteristic of her work, but also a true reflection of an artist with a generous, open and compassionate spirit. **miracalix.com**

COUNTER CULTURE

Web series spotlights indie record stores

In celebration of this year's Record Store Day, which takes place on 23 April, we welcome back 12-part documentary 'Behind The Counter' for a third series. Created by RSD and Classic Album Sundays, with support from audio specialists Bowers & Wilkins, each mini-episode shines a light on a key independent UK record store. As the owner tells their story, we're afforded teasing glimpses of their vinyl. It's a lovely thing.

The latest series features Manchester's Vinyl Revival, The Record Café in Bradford, Intense Records in Essex and south London's Peckham Soul, all institutions that Classic Album Sundays founder Colleen "Cosmo" Murphy believes play an important role in their respective local music scenes.

"I worked in four different record stores in my teens and 20s, and they're the best places to really learn about music," she explains. "On the flip-side, as a DJ and record collector, going into a record shop is much more preferable to buying online, as you get a chance to hear records you don't already know, often with great advice from one of the shopkeepers."

Want to know if your indie vinyl emporium appears in the series? Head to **youtube.com/c/bowerswilkins/videos**

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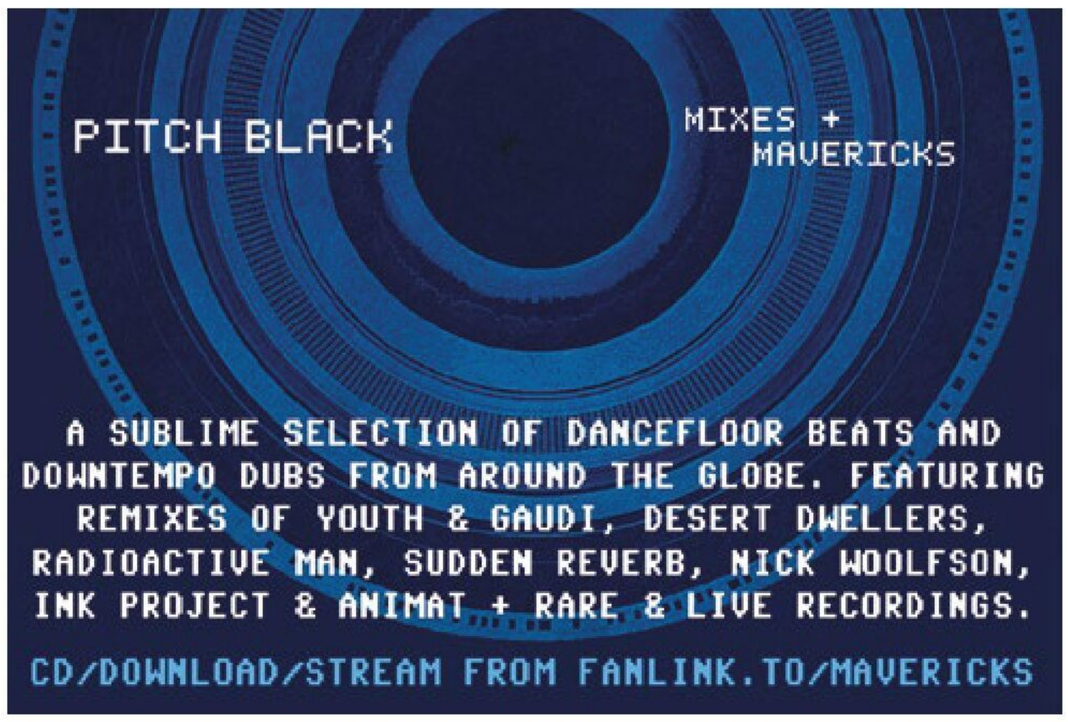

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SWITCHED-ON HISTORY

Film series spotlights electronic pioneers

'Giants' is a new online documentary series from Moog Music, chronicling the early days of electronic music and its major players. The 25-minute first episode tells the story of legendary composer Herb Deutsch, who co-designed the original Moog, and features Deutsch himself narrating over archive footage.

"Filmed and produced by Moog employee-owners," say the company, the ongoing series is about "honouring and preserving the legacy of these artists and sharing their untold stories with the world".

New episodes will air every four to six weeks on Moog Music's YouTube channel, featuring trailblazers such as Bernie Krause, Suzanne Ciani and Daniel Miller, each revealing their backstory plus "never-before-heard revelations". It's all free to watch, too. **moogmusic.com**

IN A WHILE, CROCODILE

Farewell to an Electronic Sound legend

We can hardly believe that we are saying this. Neil Mason, esteemed commissioning editor of Electronic Sound, is leaving the building.

Neil has been with us from the start, shaping the content of the magazine with the assured touch of a master sculptor. From the uncarved block of each month's edifice of newly-released electronic sounds, he's chosen the artists we've shone our editorial light on with unerring taste and accuracy. Every album we've reviewed has gone through his rigorous filtration system. Everybody we've interviewed has been carefully selected to present a broad overview of what's happening in electronic music and beyond. Unrivalled king of the rapid-fire question for our monthly Brief Encounter, inexhaustible trawler of Bandcamp for under-the-radar gems, champion of the neoclassical and the experimental, and loyal fan of everything that came out in 1983, Neil has been the foundation stone *[that's enough mason metaphors – Ed]* of the magazine for the best part of a decade.

The echoes of Neil's stewardship will reverberate for some time to come – we plan issues several months in advance – but as you read this he'll be enjoying a return to the life of a free-range journalist, happy to let someone else worry about print deadlines, typoos and word cunts. Salut Neil!

FIRST CONTACT

Lavish set honours sci-fi greats

Our favourite Liverpudlian art studio Dorothy continues its winning streak, thanks to this latest set of brilliant business cards. Like the other editions in their Business As Unusual series, this new Collector's Set imagines the calling cards of 30 sci-fi characters. Fancy a card from one of the LAPD's finest replicant hunters, Rick Deckard? Live music from Figrin D'An And The Modal Nodes straight from the Mos Eisley cantina in 'Star Wars'? Or maybe you're more interested in the services of "electrical lineman" and UFO obsessive Roy Neary? Whatever your need, it's all here. The cards come packaged in a fetching bespoke presentation box, finished with a foil-blocked lid and Imperial Blue lining. Snazzy, and only £50. **wearedorothy.com**

PULSE

PINK SHABAB

Cross-channel school-disco funkster

WHO THEY?

By day, Joseph Carvell is a London-based double-bass slinger for hire, playing alongside artists such as Marker Starling and Daniel O'Sullivan. But by night, he is leader of the upwardly mobile bedroom funk project Pink Shabab. Already with two top-notch albums on the Cologne label Karaoke Kalk, Carvell's creative process begins with him writing the bulk of the music from his room in Camberwell, before heading to the South of France where each track receives some added sparkle thanks to Parisian producer Emmanuel Mario, aka Astrobal.

WHY PINK SHABAB?

He makes a singular kind of funk – an ambient melange laced with romantic yearning and melancholy that feels appropriate to dance alone to. 'San Junipero', from his 2021 album 'Never Stopped Loving You', featuring Carvell's swooning vocals is almost Balearic in execution. His diffident delivery, redolent of Lloyd Cole or Bernard Sumner, comes with a hint of maverick eccentricity a la Momus or Destroyer's Dan Bejar. Pink Shabab's pop sensibility is strong. The whole album sounds a hair's breadth away from tipping into commerciality, but Carvell manages to pull away from the sure-footedness of pop.

TELL US MORE...

'Run Away' has a hummable verse that, once welcomed in, will wreak havoc along the corridors of your mind like a mellifluous Trojan horse. It comes in four suites and is dotted with challenging jazz chords, wantonly shapeshifting every time you think you might have a handle on things. Carvell, it seems, has been unable to run away. A promising European tour was brought to an abrupt halt after his debut show in Zurich in early 2020. Expect live Shabab-ing in 2022, though!

JEREMY ALLEN

'Never Stopped Loving You' is out now on Karaoke Kalk

BAGS FOR LIFE

For label boss **Jonny Trunk's** next trick... the Holy Grail of ephemera – the record shop plastic bag

WORDS: JOE CLAY

The latest project from Jonny Trunk, Trunk Records head honcho and a one-man National Trust for obscure pop music and ephemera, is a book celebrating the history of the humble record bag. Titled 'A-Z Of Record Shop Bags: 1940s To 1990s', Trunk has compiled more than 500 items, and in doing so provides a unique lens into UK music culture over the past century.

It's a fascinating read, and along the way you'll hear stories of the first Jewish ska retailer, how The Beatles met Brian Epstein, the record sellers who started the Premier League, plus plenty of back-door anecdotes from mythical vinyl entrepreneurs that will no doubt bring a smile to your face.

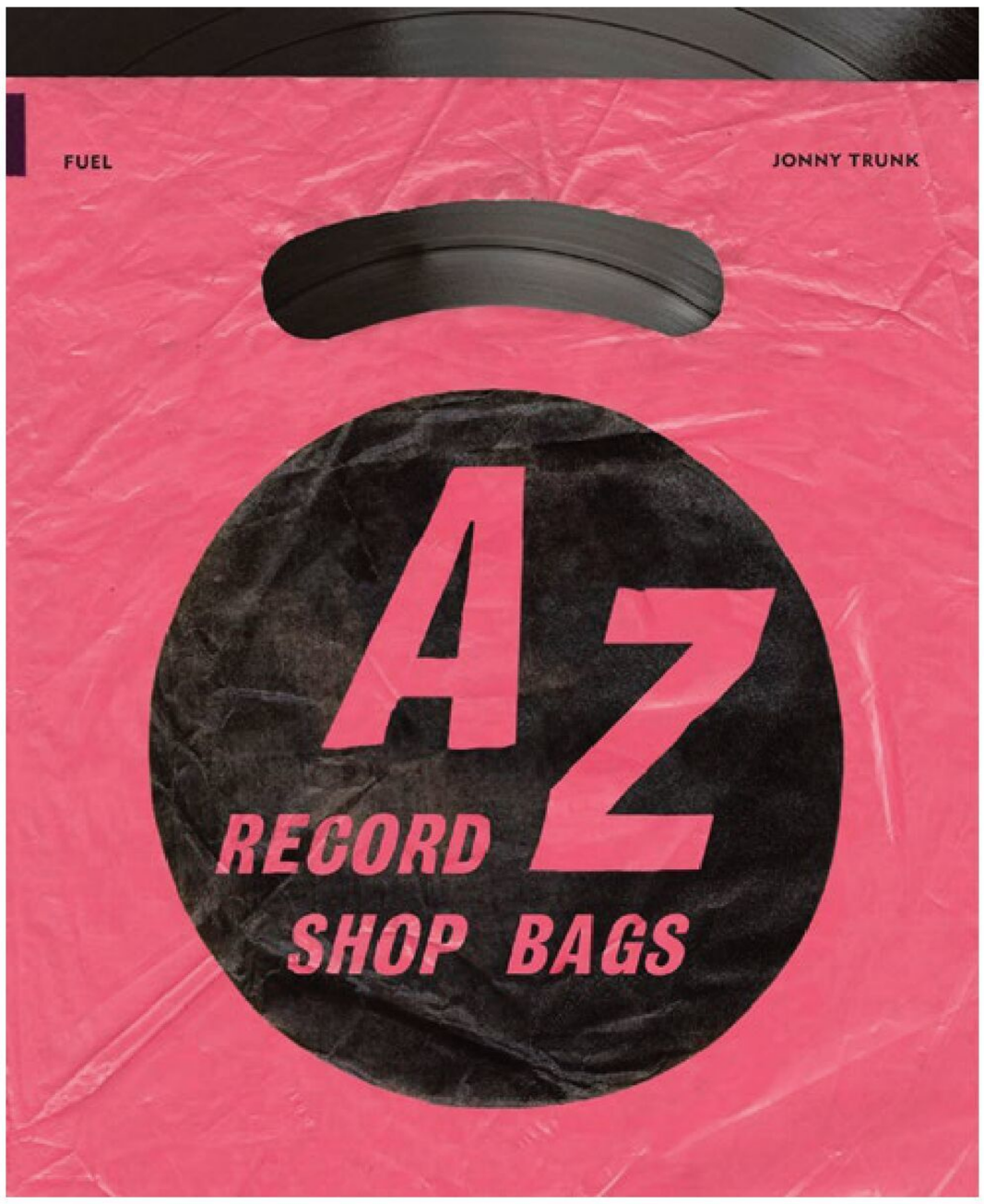
"The book started because I was buying old record shop bags and making T-shirts out of them," Trunk explains. "I was advertising for more bags and I started to see that some had good stories and I realised there was history behind the shops that I didn't know about. I then met Leon, who runs the British Record Shop Archive. He phoned me up asking if I had any swaps, and I suggested that I just pool all the bags, along with others I could find and borrow, and turn it into a groovy book."

Assisted by FUEL Publishing, who helped design the book, and with a foreword by the one and only Jon Savage, it has turned into a real thing of beauty. Alongside bags from familiar chainstores such as Our Price, Virgin and NEMS, there are also examples from their more eccentric, indie counterparts, and Trunk confirms that some of the bags featured are likely to be the only surviving examples.

"Many are incredibly rare and fragile," he says. "Some of the artwork is both powerful and totally unprofessional."

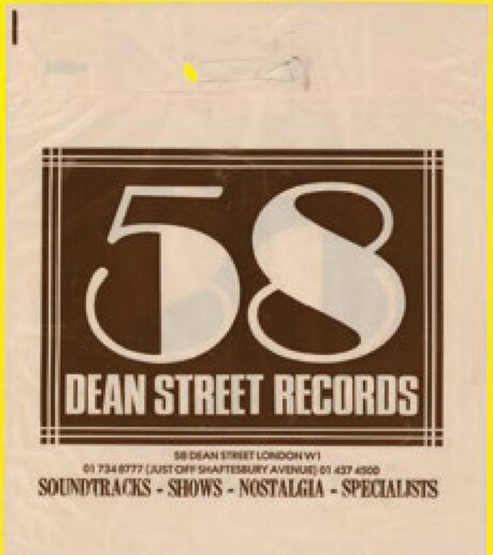
Naturally, we asked Trunk to pick out six of his favourites...

'A-Z Of Record Shop Bags' is published by FUEL on 28 April



OUR PRICE

"My local branches all seemed to have fun and friendly staff who were a dab hand at finding out the weird, musical facts that I needed answers to. Behind each counter was a big fat red book, the directory of all records in print. And if it was in print they would try and order it in for me. Thanks to Our Price in the 1980s, I got into Nancy Sinatra, Marsha Hunt and, of course, I bought all the latest goth chart fodder I could handle."



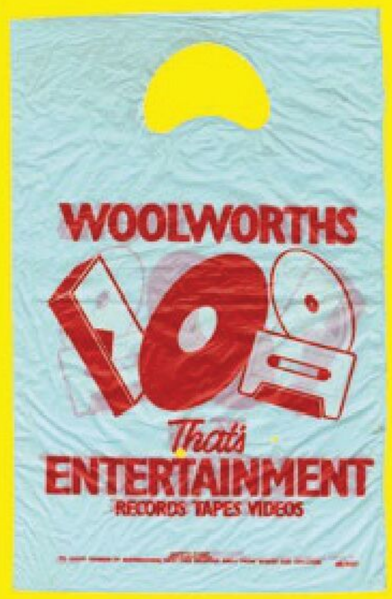
58 DEAN STREET RECORDS

"I first found out about this shop in the 1980s. I'd been trying to find a copy of the soundtrack to 'The Party' by Henry Mancini, having seen it on late night TV and been wowed by the music. My local record shops and high-street chains had no idea what I was on about when I asked about it.

"Then I found out about this shop, which was *the* specialist hideout for all things film music. I was there the next weekend, and the magical, moody world of film music finally opened up to me. It was my favourite shop until it shut down in the early 2000s. And it's not 58 Dean Street – it's 'five eight'."

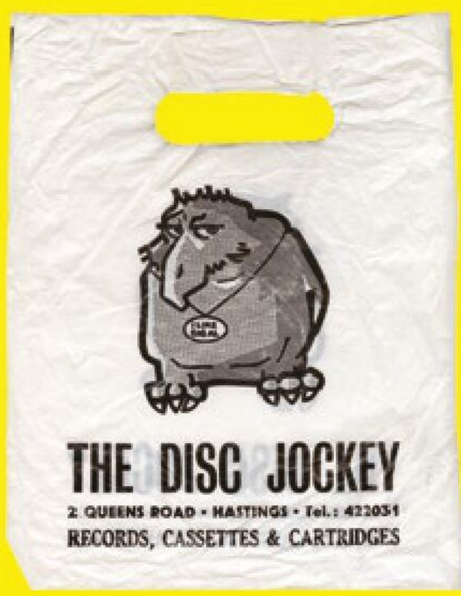
SOHO RECORDS

"This bag represents the true arrival of the mega-popular and swinging London record store, run by Alex Strickland, who'd started his shops in town a few years earlier. But the large emporium, called the Soho Record Centre, opened in 1959. It held big launches for new albums, with the artists coming in for signings and often creating stampedes at the same time. Sinatra, Shirley Bassey, Andy Williams, Sammy Davis Jr, Bob Dylan… they all made personal appearances. The record bags would get you entrance into pop nights and rave-ups, too."



WOOLWORTHS

"This is the bag that started me on this whole mad journey into record shop bags. Until I started investigating the old shops, I had no idea that Woolworths was the UK's biggest retailer of music across all formats from the 1950s to the 1980s. They achieved this by stocking all the chart hits and also remaking and re-recording classic genre records, and then selling them dirt-cheap through their Windmill, Embassy and Chevron budget labels. A cunning plan indeed."



THE DISC JOCKEY

"I love this bag. Note the groovy and slightly grumpy Martinware-style bird on the front wearing the "Big Al" necklace. "Big Al" was Alan Jensen, a local character with some unusual and often controversial marketing methods, like plastering his window with the nude 'Two Virgins' sleeves, which upset the locals in just the right kind of way. The shop was sold to Our Price in 1984. It's still sadly missed."

NEMS

"It started life as a Liverpool furniture shop run by Harry and Queenie Epstein. They expanded into music retail, and then their son Brian came along to help run what had been named the North End Music Shop. Brian had a natural talent for the job and the music stores flourished into a small but important Liverpool chain. And yes, this is where local band The Beatles met Brian. The rest, of course, is history."

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RUFFLING FEATHERS

PHOTO: MAYA NIGHTINGALE

LAIBACH

A band? An art project? A secret cabal of political provocateurs? Going about their subversive business for more than four decades, everything that this unique Slovenian collective does comes as a surprise. Absolutely everything. Brace yourselves as we are granted an audience with the entity that is Laibach

WORDS: MAT SMITH

In July 2015, a few weeks before they became the first-ever Western band to perform live in North Korea, Laibach were featured in a segment of John Oliver's hugely popular HBO show, 'Last Week Tonight'. After playing extracts from some of the group's music videos, the piece cut back to the host, whose face bore a look of quizzical, mocking confusion – a fairly typical, yet unfairly ill-informed reaction.

Formed at the start of the 1980s in Trbovlje, a mining town in what was then Yugoslavia and is now central Slovenia, Laibach have long been a divisive proposition, whether in their name, their music, their appearance or their use of symbolism. They have been described as fascists, communists, a terrorist organisation threatening the very fabric of the Yugoslav experiment and, following the bloody conflict that atomised the country into seven parts in the early 1990s, as Slovenian national heroes.

Theirs is a distinct, uncompromising and often impenetrable narrative, a Gesamtkunstwerk, or total work of art, representing a faction of a wider movement known as NSK – Neue Slowenische Kunst (New Slovenian Art) – which encompasses everything from challenging theatre to fiery philosophy. Laibach's music has many unique signifiers and anticipating what they might do next is nigh on impossible.

In the last decade, as well as their historic concert in North Korea, they have performed at the hilltop castle that overlooks Ljubljana, the capital city of Slovenia, and in the Turbine Hall at Tate Modern in London. They've played other gigs in Israel and China, provided the soundtrack to the 2012 sci-fi comedy film 'Iron Sky' and its 2019 sequel, and created the music for a 2017 theatrical production based on Friedrich Nietzsche's 'Thus Spoke Zarathustra'. Their albums during this period include a reworking of Rodgers & Hammerstein's 'The Sound Of Music' (yes, you read that right) and the erudite and accessible electro-rocker 'Spectre'.

That Laibach's latest album, 'Wir Sind Das Volk (Ein Musical Aus Deutschland)', accompanies a new musical based on the words of German dramatist, poet and essayist Heiner Müller should probably come as no surprise. The record begins with delicate piano motifs before navigating its way through coloratura vocals, intense orchestration, and harrowing texts about death and hopelessness. There's a cover of Werner Richard Heymann's 'Das Lied Vom Einsamen Mädchen' ('The Song Of The Lonely Girl'), a track made popular by Nico and Martin Gore, and the album concludes with a blistering speech on German national identity by in-house NSK philosopher Peter Mlakar.

This, then, is the enduring enigma of Laibach. You can perhaps see why John Oliver was perplexed.

PHOTO: JØRUND F PEDERSEN

Laibach don't do traditional interviews. You don't get an audience with the band. Instead, you get an email exchange with Laibach the collective entity. American avant-garde outfit The Residents, another unorthodox ensemble traversing the blurry frontier between art and music, employ a similar tactic, where all contact is through their spokesperson, Homer Flynn III.

Laibach's Homer Flynn is Ivan Novak, the group's principal songwriter and figurehead since their earliest days. Video footage shows him to be a personable, congenial and animated man, but he's an exceptionally serious and deep-thinking leader.

Also like The Residents, Laibach have not always been keen to reveal their identities. For a long time, the various members were known as "Vier Personen" ("Four People"), using the pseudonyms Eber, Saliger, Dachauer and Keller. A long list of musicians have come and gone, but the core duo of Ivan Novak and Milan Fras have remained constant throughout, as has the band's idiosyncratic sound. Fras, whose incredible bass vocals and weird headgear have been talking points for 40 years, is their instantly identifiable frontman.

To paraphrase their 1987 cover of Opus' 'Live Is Life' – Laibach *is* Laibach. Simply and reassuringly. After four decades, we should be well past the point of explaining or rationalising their motivations, yet there somehow remains a quintessentially human need to decipher the group. We don't value uncertainty. We don't like things that can't be neatly and conveniently explained. So the fact that, particularly in a world requiring unrelenting transparency, Laibach continue to give very little away is quite frustrating but almost honourable too.

'Wir Sind Das Volk' ('We Are The People') continues Laibach's long-standing involvement with the theatre and their ongoing interest in the works of Heiner Müller, who they viewed as a kindred spirit in their formative years.

"In 1984, when the group were basically officially forbidden in Yugoslavia, we were asked to compose the music for Heiner Müller's 'Quartet' at the Slovenian National Theatre in Ljubljana," say Laibach. "'Quartet' was based on Pierre Choderlos De Laclos' 1782 epistolary novel 'Les Liaisons Dangereuses' and this version was directed by Eduard Miler.

"We'd heard about Müller quite a lot in the early 1980s. He was regarded as one of the most important German and European playwrights since Bertolt Brecht. He was a significant contemporary intellectual figure. Many of his plays were featured in the repertoire of diverse theatres, especially the more radical ones in Yugoslavia."

The music for 'Wir Sind Das Volk' is a reminder to Laibach that they never managed to work directly with Müller, who died in 1995. Apart from 'Quartet', the closest the group came was in 1987, when they crafted the score for a performance of Müller's 'Macbeth', a reimagining of William Shakespeare's "Scottish Play" at the Deutsches Schauspielhaus in Hamburg.

"In February 1985, we met Müller in Berlin by coincidence, and it turned out that he was very enthusiastic about Laibach," they recall. "He proposed that we collaborate on one of his upcoming theatre productions. Unfortunately, it did not happen, but we were told that he later used some of our music in another production he worked on.

"Müller began his career some two decades before us and in a different media, but we were both kind of regime outlaws. He was an outlaw in East Germany and Laibach were outlaws in Yugoslavia. The officials censored us and banned us, they wanted to abolish both of us, or at least to spit us out from our countries as dissidents, but we did not allow them this pleasure. We insisted on staying. In the end, they gave up and accepted us as their own – Müller in East Germany and us in Yugoslavia – although they were still not quite sure what to do with us."

PHOTOS: MIRO MAJCEN

Laibach note that music and drama were the two main facets of the wide-reaching scope of Neue Slowenische Kunst when it was founded in 1984.

"NSK was formed in conjunction with the Scipion Nasice Sisters Theatre group," they explain. "In 1986, we staged the theatrical spectacle 'Baptism Below Triglav' together, which presented a unique history of the Slovenian nation's aspirations for independence, as well as the story of the historical – and especially theatrical – avant-garde."

Around the same time, Laibach were invited to work with Scottish dancer and choreographer Michael Clark on a production called 'No Fire Escape In Hell', the band conjuring up what Artforum described as "a vision of Valhalla" via Fritz Lang's 'Metropolis'. They've collaborated with many other significant theatrical figures in the years since then, including Milo Rau and Sebastian Baumgarten.

"The theatre is an important aspect of and for Laibach," they say. "Even the elements of life itself – birth, school, love, marriage, work, holidays, sports, religion, politics, celebrations, courts, war, death, funerals – we understand as a succession of carefully directed and performed theatrical scenes. This has also been confirmed to us by many film directors, such as Fellini, Chaplin and especially Jacques Tati. Performances and films try to concisely present the rituals of life, find and define their meaning, rationalise them and offer various possible starting points, interpretations, sequels and conclusions. In this respect, theatre and film are like platforms, software applications through which we can virtually capture our life."

Laibach liken the mainstream media's obsession with reality television as proof that life is a sort of theatre.

"We experienced this during our visit to North Korea, where life is organised theatrically even more fanatically than elsewhere in the world," they say. "Of course, we always saw Laibach and our performances from this perspective too – as a theatrical ritual, a directed reality show."

Unlike 'Quartet' and 'Macbeth', 'Wir Sind Das Volk' is not a play, it's a musical based around Heiner Müller's texts. Müller wrote many pieces that adapted the works of others – Shakespeare and Brecht being two regular sources of inspiration – and would perhaps have appreciated the interpretative response to his own words.

The group were invited to provide the music for 'Wir Sind Das Volk' by Anja Quickert, head of Internationale Heiner Müller Gesellschaft, in 2019. The production premiered at the Hebbel am Ufer theatre in Berlin in February 2020, but the pandemic cut short its run. It returned to the HAU for more dates last month.

"Anja knows Müller's opus very well," note Laibach. "We discussed the content and the meaning of the whole project with her, but the choice of texts was basically hers. She also more or less directed the project. Our approach was quite flexible and we wanted to try some new working methods in terms of organising the sound. In a way, we followed Müller's own strategy of cutting and rearranging the material, taking his words and putting them in another context, then rebooting it with music in order to drag the audience into it, or alienate them from it.

"Music unlocks the emotions and is therefore a great manipulative tool and a powerful propagandistic weapon. And that's why the combination of Heiner Müller, who saw theatre as a political institution, and Laibach, whose language is deliberately and consciously political – while at the same time avoiding daily politics – could be nothing else but a musical."

'Wir Sind Das Volk' is ultimately a treatise on what it is – and what it was – to be German. It alternates between sober reflection and anger, before unflinchingly settling its all-encompassing gaze on the treatment of Germany's Ausländer – the minorities, outsiders, foreigners and others who do not conform to a cruelly idealised national identity. Central to this is the notion of das Volk (the people), an expression that was inverted during the Third Reich from a folkloric, universal concept to one of nationalistic power. Although restored as a unifying salve on the demolition of the Berlin Wall, it seems to have been co-opted by the right wing again now.

So what do a group hailing from a town in Slovenia know about the German identity crisis? As it happens, quite a lot.

Let's start with the name. Laibach was what the city of Ljubljana was called in the Middle Ages. But while the name could be seen as harking back to Slovenian history and tradition, it troubled the arbiters of Yugoslav culture. It ran contrary to the ideal of a united socialist Yugoslavia just at the point when, following the death of its authoritarian leader Josip Broz Tito in 1980, the country was edging towards the bloody conflict which would redraw its borders all over again.

Even more controversial was the fact that Laibach was the German name for Ljubljana and it had been revived when Slovenia was annexed by the Nazis in 1941. Considering the combative nature of the band's first records, to say nothing of their fondness for military uniforms and jackboots, it's easy to see why the Yugoslav authorities believed them to be a threat.

German history and language still run deep in the veins of Laibach, who have always switched freely between German and English, with their native Slovenian tongue taking third place. Given their affection for German culture, it's logical that Heiner Müller should act as something of an artistic beacon for them.

The band that we now know as Laibach emerged in Trbovlje as Salte Morale in 1978. They were formed by multi-disciplinary artist Dejan Knez, who renamed the group – at the instigation of his father, abstract painter Janez Knez – when Ivan Novak and Milan Fras joined in 1980. Knez left Laibach in 2006, although he continues to make music with 300.000 Verschiedene Krawalle, one of the many artists operating in the band's orbit.

Laibach made headlines from the off. The anger and the tension of their music, inevitably inspired by the industrial noises of their home town and delivered through mechanical sounds and pounding drums, was hard to ignore. Much of it was produced on homemade gear.

"We initially assembled our instruments only because we didn't have the money and the ability to buy the right equipment," they say, sounding like they're issuing a weighty statement even when they are merely recalling a memory. "They were good only because they were so bad and poorly made. Nevertheless, they helped us to create the distinctive Laibach sound."

PHOTO: LUKA KASE

Describing themselves as a “youth culture movement” rather than a band, Laibach established a fanbase among disenfranchised young Yugoslavs and the more broad-minded sectors of the arts community. They borrowed liberally from the suprematist imagery of the Ukrainian painter Kazimir Malevich, most notably using his heavy black crosses as an identifier for the group. Seen as a modern art hero at the start of the 20th century, Malevich became a casualty of Stalin’s disdain for perceived bourgeois paintings after the Second World War.

Laibach’s fate was to be somewhat similar to that of Kazimir Malevich. The Yugoslav authorities were suspicious of their motivations, feelings aggravated by their confrontational sound and military visual aesthetic, as well as the pornographic video footage and smoke bombs they introduced to their live shows. An early multimedia performance with visual artists IRWIN, who were later also part of NSK, and the theatre company Rdeči Pilot was closed down because of its political messages.

Their uneasy relationship with the powers-that-be led to the group being banned from using the name Laibach in Yugoslavia in 1983. They managed to work under the radar for a while, promoting themselves with anonymous posters brandished with Malevich’s crosses, but it quickly became clear that it was no longer possible for them to continue operating in their homeland.

As well as the crosses, Laibach have employed a range of other symbols over the decades and many of them have divided opinion. Deer (and deer horns) have regularly featured in their sleeve art, as has Triglav, the highest mountain in Slovenia. Such iconography has sometimes placed them on a precipice between celebrating the country’s alpine geography and a more problematic nationalistic idealism. Putting a picture of a kozolec – a traditional hayrack found throughout rural Slovenia – on the cover of their ‘Rekapitulacija 1980-1984’ retrospective compilation album was not without controversy, particularly given that founder member Tomaž Hostnik committed suicide by hanging himself from one of these structures in 1982.

The band’s individual style still causes unease for some people. In one of the many memorable scenes of ‘Liberation Day’, a documentary about their trip to North Korea, Laibach’s official handler, a nervous state employee called Mr Ri, is seen whispering to the director that Milan Fras needs to remove his ever-present cap because it makes him look like “a Nazi”. Elsewhere in the film, it’s revealed that the authorities who sanctioned the concert tracked through endless documents indicating that the group were likely to cause political problems while they were in the country.

‘BLACK SQUARE’, ‘BLACK CIRCLE, AND ‘BLACK CROSS’ PAINTINGS BY KAZIMIR MALEVICH - PHOTO: SHAKKO

PHOTO: MIRO MAJCEN

Unwelcome and frustrating negative attention at home in their formative years led Laibach to garner a more accepting audience elsewhere. Their mid-80s Occupied Europe tours saw them playing to receptive crowds across the continent. The band dressed in Yugoslav army uniforms for the shows, something familiar to them from their national service but somewhat shocking for most gig-goers.

After their 1985 tour, the group briefly settled in London, where they recorded their second album, 'Nova Akropola', with producer Rico Conning. During their time in the UK, they worked as film extras on Stanley Kubrick's 'Full Metal Jacket', the battle scenes of which were shot at a disused gasworks in London's East End.

"We would do all sorts of things if we ran out of money," remember Laibach. "Our friends from the band Last Few Days told us that Stanley Kubrick was looking for extras and they asked us if we would join them. It was easy for us. We went to the set and we were given American uniforms, fake weapons and fresh haircuts. We had already served in the Yugoslav army, so we were used to military drills and wearing uniforms.

"We had to do some daily training and live in the army barracks, but the food was regular and the payment was very good. We ran up and down the range along with a few hundred other extras for about a month, with Commander Kubrick, his daughter, and the rest of his assistants giving us orders. It was a pleasure to be part of that film. We gave Kubrick a copy of 'Nova Akropola', which he accepted gratefully."

Laibach's sound was gradually changing while they recorded 'Nova Akropola'. Although still in thrall to the physicality of industrial music, the album illustrated what would become a consistent feature of the band's output – a willingness to expand their borders in whatever direction they chose. In contrast with their performances only a couple of years earlier, which relied almost exclusively on squalls of saxophone and intense drumming, 'Nova Akropola' adopted symphonic stateliness and added electronic beats.

"We first understood Laibach as a kind of monolithic and monotonous industrial machine that produces repetitive militant sounds structured according to a zeitgeist," they explain. "We soon realised that this monolithic quality can – and does – consist of a complete spectrum of colours and is therefore not just monochrome. This also applies to different styles and languages. In short, totalitarianism is – just as music is – all-encompassing. That is a simple philosophical fact."

Every Laibach project can be seen as a discrete work of art. The only similarity between one enterprise and the next is the lack of similarity. But while each album or event is unique, it is nevertheless immediately recognisable as theirs, whether in its genre, scope, breadth, audacity, implausibility or complete refusal to be anticipated. To some, this may be exasperating. To the majority of the band's fans, it is only to be expected. Sometimes they are surrealists, sometimes they flirt with pop, and sometimes they posit political viewpoints without suggesting any meaningful explanation of what they might represent.

"We live in an explicitly confusing and contradictory time, where truth has now truly become a lie and where freedom is only a voluntary slavery," they put forward by way of explanation, such as it is. "It is not entirely clear whether there will be a war tomorrow or maybe we will have a sunny day and everything will be OK. Laibach are big enough for all these contradictions. If we didn't practice different faces and styles, it would be very difficult to correspond to the current time."

There's certainly something in that. But Laibach's unplaceable and unpredictable quality hasn't just helped the band to integrate with whatever is happening around them. It's enabled them to stay relevant too.

"Our listeners are already accustomed to the fact that Laibach would disappoint them if we didn't disappoint them," they suggest, with the email equivalent of a matter-of-fact shrug. "Our listeners know that the only real way to understand Laibach is by misunderstanding."

This mindset is perhaps hard to reconcile with a group that has wryly covered not only Opus' 'Live Is Life', but also records such as Europe's 'The Final Countdown', Status Quo's 'In The Army Now' and Queen's 'One Vision', the latter re-titled 'Geburt Einer Nation' ('Birth Of A Nation'). It's impossible to decide whether they're taking the mickey or isolating some ultra-important message that somehow got lost in the original track. With Milan Fras' deep vocals to the fore, it's like trying to imagine your school disco if the songs had been hand-picked and re-recorded by the Stasi Male Voice Choir.

"We have repeatedly explained that Laibach practice only the deadly serious humour that cannot take a joke – and this is how a listener should approach it," they insist. "We should not ignore the deadly serious Charlie Chaplin, who shot the satirically and terribly accurate comedy 'The Great Dictator' in 1940, where the core of the film is Chaplin's shockingly serious speech in the role of a Jewish barber who plays Hitler in a comedy of confusion.

"Chaplin sent this message along with the film to Hitler himself. As a Chaplin fan, he supposedly watched it at least twice, completely alone. Which, of course, further complicates the perception of this film. Chaplin later stated that he could not have made 'The Great Dictator' if he had known the true extent of the horrors of the Nazi concentration camps at the time. He was probably unaware that many internees in the camps had endured and survived because they had helped themselves a lot with Chaplin-esque Holocaust humour."

Chaplin's character in the movie, Adenoid "Ado" Hynkel, and his fascist counterpart Benzino Napaloni are both mentioned in the lyrics of 'Tanz Mit Laibach' ('Dance With Laibach'), a highlight of the band's 2003 EBM album 'WAT'. The track sounds like a call to dance across the European Union in jackboots – until you detect the references to 'The Great Dictator' and realise you have fallen for their jokes again. Keep this in mind when approaching Laibach's soundtracks to the 'Iron Sky' sci-fi comedy films, which envisage a colony of Nazis living on the moon and developing spaceships to take over the world.

The Laibach project that perhaps best underlines their seriously humorous side is their comprehensive overhaul of The Beatles' 'Let It Be' album, the record often described as showing the rifts that emerged between the Fab Four. The Vier Personen used the reputation of 'Let It Be' in an allegorical fashion. Released in 1988, at a time of increasing turbulence in Yugoslavia, their version of the album – full of rousing choirs, dramatic synths and industrial percussion – was intended as an analogue for the country's impending collapse.

The project was also in keeping with Laibach's ongoing cynicism about European history in general. The theme, although typically never explicitly communicated as a criticism, was evocative of Czech author Milan Kundera's observation that "all of this century's greatest works of art can be understood as long meditations on the possible end of European humanity". Bearing in mind that Peter Jackson's 'Get Back' documentary has recently revealed The Beatles were actually still a pretty tight creative unit during the making of 'Let It Be', it's tempting to wonder if this knowledge might have changed Laibach's approach to the album.

PHOTO: KAJA BREZOCNIK

PHOTOS: VALTER LEBAN

"Probably not," they say. "In the early 1970s, it was already clear that the daring Yugoslav utopia of brotherhood and unity, of self-government and political non-alignment, would not last very long. The Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact were cracking at the seams as well. The story of The Beatles' break-up, which took place around the recording of 'Let It Be', together with the deaths of Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, Jim Morrison, Che Guevara and Martin Luther King Jr, was therefore somehow a metaphor for the end of an era of anti-Cold War pop heroism, the end of the dream of the flower generation. It was the end of the revolutionary 1960s.

"On the political and economic map of Europe, what the Italians call the 'Years of Lead', which were marked by terrorism, started at the beginning of the 1970s. The Soviets and the Warsaw Pact allies had invaded Czechoslovakia, Tito was getting older, and the music scene turned into decadence and intolerable formalism, which was to some extent later interrupted only by punk and the independent record scene."

Laibach's 'Let It Be' was widely lauded by the music press and, however unlikely it might seem, even found its way into the hands of Paul McCartney himself.

"That is what we were told," say the band. "Apparently, he played our album, or maybe just selected songs, as the opening music to some of his shows. In the 1990s, his second wife, Heather Mills, was close to our very good friend, a ski instructor from our home town of Trbovlje. Heather didn't know much about The Beatles then, but according to our friend, she was listening to Laibach's 'Let It Be' on cassette while they were driving around Slovenia in a small car. Years later, when she was married to Paul McCartney, they visited Slovenia together and spent a few days here. Unfortunately, we were not around at that time, so we never met."

Interviewed in the early 1980s about their motivations, Laibach offered their goal as "opening up a concrete possibility for the development of a politicised, systematically ideological art as a consequence of the influence of politics and ideology".

There is a stylistic familiarity to this proclamation. Flick through Alex Danchev's 2011 book '100 Artists' Manifestos' and a certain form of language emerges, with statements of intent that seem to mean something only to the author. The circularity of these manifestos is usually deliberate, leading the reader to feel as if they're excluded, because they can't get a handle on the theories.

One manifesto not included by Danchev is that of Neue Slowenische Kunst. What united the various factions of NSK – from Laibach, the Scipion Nasice Sisters Theatre and IRWIN, to the likes of Retrovision (filmmakers) and New Collective Studios (graphic designers) – was a willingness to directly attack Yugoslav culture, often using the same extremist methods and totalitarian narratives that had shaped it. Not for nothing are Laibach on record as saying, "Art is a noble calling that requires fanaticism". This was certainly the case with the Scipion Nasice Sisters Theatre, which doggedly followed a path towards self-destruction in the late 1980s.

NSK have resolutely and repeatedly courted controversy, sometimes taking existing imagery and repurposing it against itself. The irony has frequently been missed, as happened with a poster entered into a competition for the 1987 Yugoslavian Youth Day. Intentionally timed for when the Scipion Nasice Sisters Theatre ceased operations, NSK took a Nazi propaganda painting and replaced an image of Hitler with one of Tito. The poster was banned when the authorities found out it was based on a Nazi picture – but only after it had won the competition.

The fact that NSK operate as a vast partnership across a range of artistic and philosophical disciplines is an ethos that also drives Laibach's output.

"Laibach is actually, by definition, a personified collaboration," they offer. "Everything that we do requires the integration of different skills, with many people and machines. As early as 1982, we therefore wrote in our own manifesto that 'Laibach works as a team (the collective spirit), according to the model of industrial production and totalitarianism, which means the individual does not speak – the organisation does'.

"We believe we practice some kind of elaborated Gesamtkunstwerk," they continue. "Even when we collaborate with artists who are not part of the Laibach collective, we listen to them and try to adapt to their logic, and yet we remain Laibach in our essence. Here we are, in a sense, characteristically and tactically very close to Zelig from Woody Allen's movie of the same name. The film is a symptomatic example of the practice of over-identification. Despite his chameleonism, Zelig always remains Zelig."

PHOTO: MIRO MAJCEN

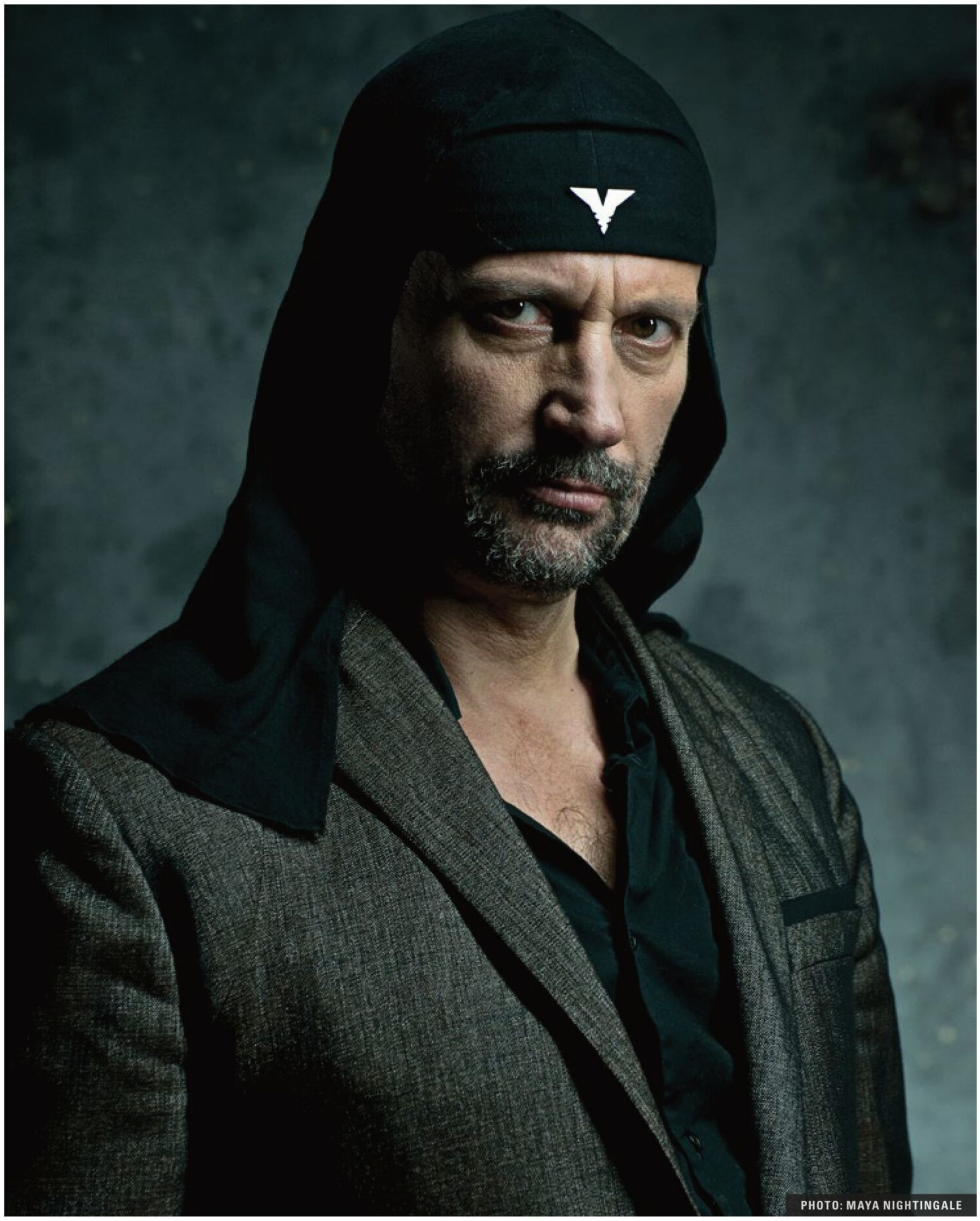


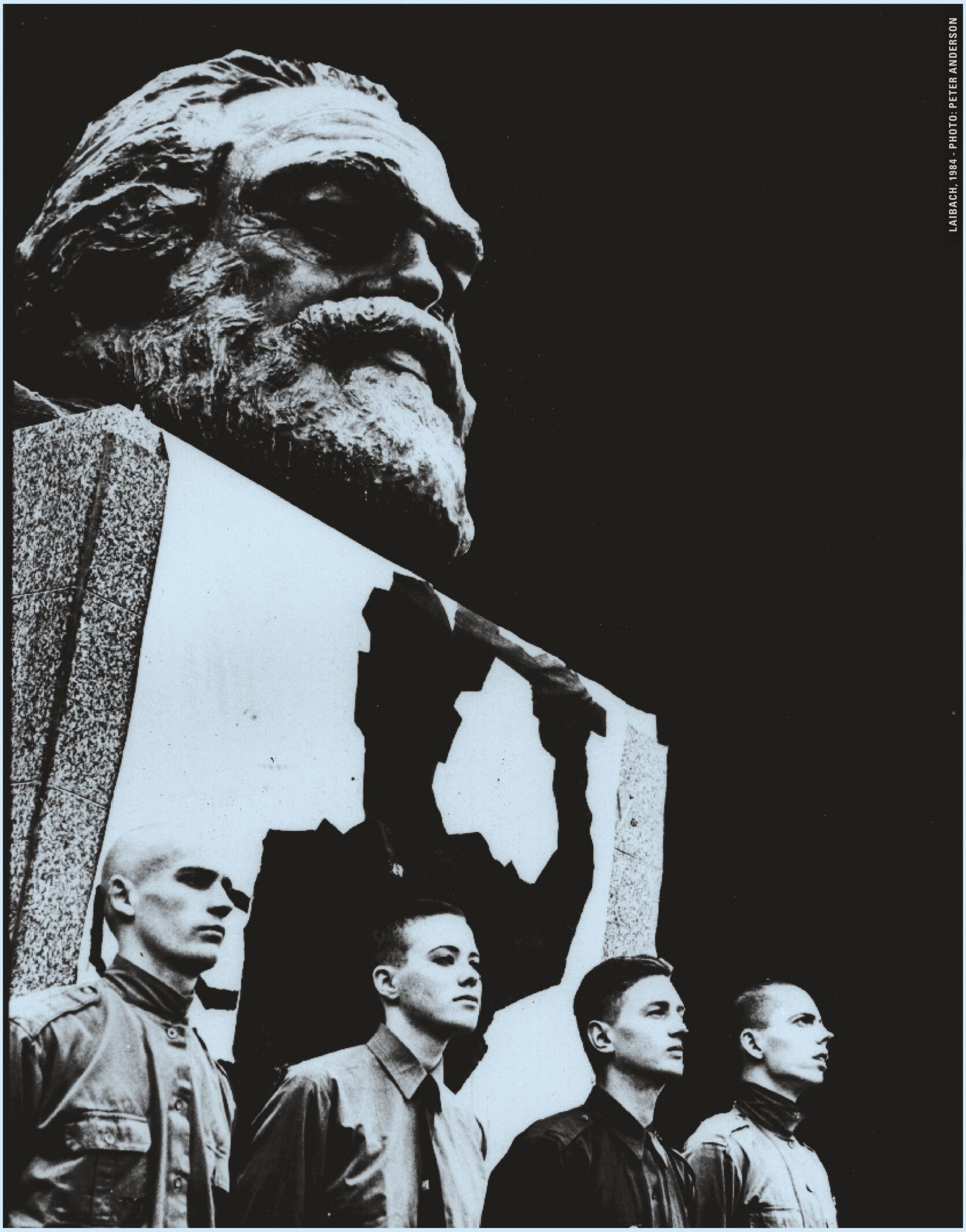
PHOTO: MAYA NIGHTINGALE

At its heart, art is unknowable. All we can be sure of is what it provokes in us and how it makes us feel.

Laibach's work is more unknowable than most – deliberately unexplained, fundamentally unapologetic, and using political dogma and symbolism without revealing which side they're on. Assuming they're actually on any side, of course. Whether it's pop melodies, electronic beats, industrial percussion, melodramatic orchestration or incisive interpretation, the group are as elusive and as essential today as they were when they first announced themselves to an unsuspecting Slovenian public in 1980.

"We understand art as fanaticism that requires diplomacy – and whatever else it takes," say Laibach in conclusion. "Life would be a real waste of time if we did not try to grasp it, because how else should we be aware of its value, if not through understanding its meaning? The highest, most complex and comprehensive form of defining life is art, including music. This is where all our motivation lies. Everything else – the presentation of projects, the release of new albums, the promotions, the concerts, the tours – all of these are a necessary ballast in the service of supporting the initial idea."

'Wir Sind Das Volk (Ein Musical Aus Deutschland)' is out now on CD on Mute. The vinyl version follows in June



LAIBACH, 1984 - PHOTO: PETER ANDERSON

A special report from Ljubljana on electronic music in Slovenia, a country with an exciting and thriving scene headed up by Laibach, but boasting a host of less-celebrated bands, producers, labels and more

WORDS: JAŠA BUŽINEL

FIND ME IN THE DAMP BASEMENT*

* English translation of “Poišči me v vlažni kleti”, a line from Borghesia’s ‘No Hope, No Fear’ referring to Klub K4, the pivotal Ljubljana venue

Thanks to a handful of bloggers, vinyl junkies and tape collectors – such as the incredible YouTube channel Dronemf S – obscure Yugoslav electronic music has reached new audiences in recent times, igniting an interest in the sonic legacy of the region. The focus of this piece is on the Slovenian scene, which has often been overlooked, both in academic and hobby circles. While it represents only a small section of the wider Yugoslav story, Slovenia has long been a hotbed of exciting electronic and experimental sounds. I wrote a bachelor thesis on the topic a few years ago, but I feel I barely touched the surface.

The 1980s was the decade when Slovenian and Western cultural time finally synchronised, providing a fertile climate for audio experimentalism across the country. DIY projects could be found in almost every village, but the centres of creativity were the major cities of Ljubljana, Maribor and Celje. One of the recurring cliches when it comes to Slovenian electronic music is to wonder how a tiny state at the foot of Mitteleuropa – the wealthiest member of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia up until its demise – could produce an epochal phenomenon like Laibach. The truth is that the decade was defined by many lesser-known bands, producers, labels, clubs and more, most of which never reached the “outside world”.

Let’s start with Pankrti, the first Slovenian punk band. Their debut single, ‘Lepi In Prazni’ / ‘Lublana Je Bulana’ (1978), was followed by the first Yugoslav punk LP, ‘Dolgcajt’ (1980), and these records helped Ljubljana to become an epicentre of alternative youth culture, gaining more prominence than Belgrade (in Serbia) and Zagreb (in Croatia). During this period, the political establishment underwent a process of liberalisation, resulting in more daring, critical and controversial music, cinema, theatre and new media art. The freedom of the press grew considerably and previously forbidden subjects were openly discussed in public debates. Progressive ideas permeated the urban areas and activist initiatives were born, from the gay and lesbian community to the anti-nuclear movement.

A crucial institution for the dissemination of both music and ideas was Radio Student, which was founded in 1969 and is one of Europe’s oldest independent non-commercial radio stations. The acclaimed Ljubljana festival Novi Rock, where Laibach gave a legendary performance with their original singer Tomaž Hostnik in 1982, also played a crucial role in the popularisation of electronic music and post-punk. Its name, “New Rock”, was a nod to the tectonic changes brought about by punk and it was here that many Slovenians heard electronic sounds for the first time.

Strictly speaking, it was producer and synth pioneer Miha Kralj – dubbed the Yugoslav Jean-Michel Jarre, although I see him more as a Slovenian Moroder – who brought electronic and ambient music to Yugoslavia. His space-themed debut album, ‘Andromeda’ (1980), sold 100,000 copies across Europe and he remained popular throughout the 80s, releasing solo records, producing other artists, performing on TV shows and competing in national song contests. One of his more eccentric collaborations was with pop singer Milan Petrovič on the album ‘Dvajseta So Nora Leta’, a collection of predominantly cheesy Italo disco tunes with some brilliant surprises.

There were two trajectories in the early days of Slovenian electronic music. While Miha Kralj opted for an accessible sound and mainstream success, artists like Laibach, Borghesia and Mario Marzidovsek emerged from the underground and took the road less travelled, focusing on industrial, darkwave, EBM and other left-field aesthetics.

A product of the small mining town of Trbovlje, Laibach’s avant-garde multidisciplinary practice and political controversies had a huge impact on the regional scene. They spawned imitators like Abbildungen Varieté, an industrial collective from Maribor, the second-biggest Slovenian city, who released a self-titled cassette on the Galerija ŠKUC Izdaja tape label in 1983. Laibach themselves meanwhile became a larger-than-life entity, breaking national boundaries and gaining recognition around Europe.

Beyond Laibach, the members of the band frequently hid behind various monickers, one of their most feted side projects being 300.000 Verschiedene Krawalle, comprising of Dejan Knez, Iztok Turk and Peter Mlakar. Their outstanding techno-punk tracks ‘Policijski Hit’ and ‘Prva TV Generacija’ were featured on the ‘84’ compilation issued by ZKP RTVL, a Yugoslav major label run by the Slovenian national broadcaster. The collection, which also boasts acts such as Otroci Socializma and Cao Pičke, is a great introduction to the cutting-edge artists of the period.

Another alias used by Laibach members, most notably Andrej Lupinc, was Keller, a name synonymous with minimal and abstract industrial experimentation. Keller’s discography includes several cassette albums, the first three for Galerija ŠKUC Izdaja and a fourth for the FV Založba label. This last release, ‘Sizzling!’, came out in 1986 and I’d particularly recommend the tracks ‘Lapcej’, a ritualistic jam that could land in a mix by Serbo-German selector Vladimir Ivkovic, and ‘Mali Mili Gnili’, which is a nod to Throbbing Gristle.

Like Galerija ŠKUC Izdaja, FV Založba was a vital outlet for alternative music. Founded by members of the AV collective Borghesia and the people behind Disko FV, a seminal student club in the 1980s, the label issued around 60 cassettes, vinyl LPs and VHS tapes between 1985 and 1994, among them some notorious live recordings by Nick Cave, Swans and Diamanda Galás.

Borghesia are probably Slovenia's best-known electronic export after Laibach. Established in 1982 as an offshoot of the alternative drama company Theatre FV-112/15 (later the video production unit FV Video), they were led by producer Aldo Ivančič and singer Dario Seraval. They were among the first bands to introduce Slovenian and regional audiences to new wave, electropop, disco, darkwave and EBM.

Borghesia's provocative image, captured in iconic music videos directed by band members Zemira Alajbegovič and Neven Korda, was inspired by the prohibited and the repressed, especially homosexuality and fetishism. See their video for 'On' for reference. Their initial releases, via Galerija ŠKUC Izdaja and FV Založba, secured the support of Slovenia's electronic music mavericks and it wasn't long before they began to attract an international fanbase, drawing comparisons with DAF and Front 242.

As they became more widely known, Borghesia signed to the Belgian label Play It Again Sam, releasing their breakthrough album, 'No Hope, No Fear', in 1987. The title track remains one of the undisputed alternative anthems of the day. Four more PIAS albums followed, resulting in several European tours and catching the attention of NME and Melody Maker. Borghesia continued to perform and release records until 1995, returning with a different line-up in 2009 and remaining sporadically active to this day.

Aldo Ivančič also made his mark as a pioneering DJ. He spent some time in London in the late 1970s, discovering Cabaret Voltaire, The Human League, The Normal, Fad Gadget and more, whose records he subsequently introduced to audiences in Ljubljana. He was also partly responsible for Magnus, the first festival of gay culture in Yugoslavia, which was held in 1984 at a venue offering the earliest "dark room" in Eastern Europe. Ivančič later became the resident DJ at Ljubljana's Klub K4, where the famed K4 Roza (K4 Pink) night was held on Sundays for many years, and mentored the first techno generation. One of his alumni at K4 was the superstar DJ Umek.

Another significant figure on the 1980s Slovenian scene was Iztok Turk, a versatile musician and producer who left an envy-inducing legacy with the punk bands Kuzle and Otroci Socializma, as well as various Laibach spin-offs, but his biggest success came with the much-loved electropop act Videosex. Taking notes from groups like Depeche Mode and Yazoo, Videosex opted for a more commercial sound, but they still managed to retain a sense of underground mystique.

According to the music journalist Igor Bašin, Videosex were the first Yugoslav pop act that could compete with its Western counterparts in terms of quality. Their 1983 single on ZKP RTVL, 'Moja Mama', a cover of a Kuzle song, was famous for its clever juxtaposition of uplifting synth melodies and depressing lyrics about the suicide of the subject's mother. Videosex's self-titled album appeared the following year and is considered to be one of the highlights of the era. Just listen to the Italo disco-inspired 'Neonska Reklama 2' and the synthpop masterpiece 'Detektivska Priča' and you will hear why.

While many of these artists had an almost immediate impact on the scene, the enigmatic Maribor-based experimental producer and DIY visionary Mario Marzidovsek remained unfamiliar to the wider public for most of his life. It was only after his death in 2011 that the Slovenian label Monofonika brought attention to his opus with various archive releases, including their 'Ex Yu Electronica' compilation series (currently counting 10 issues), which are solid stepping stones to finding some excellent embryonic Yugoslav electronic and experimental sounds.

BORGHESIA, 1984 - PHOTO: JANE ŠTRAVS

MIHA KRALJ, 1982

KIKIMORE, 2022

An eccentric artist inspired by the avant-garde, Marzidovsek may have been an obscure figure, but he was also an internationally active and hyper-productive home studio beast, self-releasing seven albums on his label Marzidovshek Minimal Laboratorium between 1984 and 1985. During the 80s, his cacophonous and hermetic industrial productions were featured on more than 30 international compilations as a result of his involvement in the mail art network, but he stopped making music in 1991.

Still with the underground, the first three cassettes by Demolition Group and their side project Silver Baracudas, self-released on Opus Manuum in 1985 and 1986, are hot tips for aficionados of EBM-tinged adventures. Hailing from the town of Brežice, Demolition Group are today considered one of Slovenia's foremost rock bands, but their early material was minimalist, cold, funky and psychedelic. Their song 'You Better…' is like a soundtrack to William Gibson's 'Neuromancer', while 'Beautiful Site/Hard' comes across like a proto-rave banger by The Pop Group. These are some truly cult releases marked by an esoteric darkwave atmosphere.

For lovers of the shadowy, another hidden treasure are Electric Fish, an industrial duo from the small town of Žalec. As part of the anti-psychiatry movement, they collaborated on various performances with the Italian improvisational group Musika and the Coordinamento Musicale Il Posto Della Fragole organisation, leaving behind a demo tape ('Materijal Zvok', 1986), an official cassette album ('Optimalni Usodni Minimum', 1987) and some rare compilation appearances. Their sound, an amalgam of rhythmic noise and musique concrète, is best captured on the composition 'Materijal Zvok II', which feels like a lo-fi forerunner of contemporary techno by someone like Maenad Veyl.

Following Slovenia's declaration of independence in 1991, new cultural forms flooded the domestic music market. Rave and club culture started to bloom, especially at Klub K4. It was techno that led the way, taking the country's electronic scene to fresh heights. Names like DJ Umek, the godfather of Slovenian techno, and the luminary duo Random Logic, whose productions were sometimes attributed to Detroit hero Robert Hood, along with labels such as Matrix Music, ABsense and Consumer Recreation, came to define the techno landscape.

At the height of commercial clubbing, most notably at the world-renowned Ambasada Gavioli discotheque, which opened in 1995, Slovenian electronica began to split into micro-scenes, just as it did everywhere else. By the end of the 1990s, a wide range of genres – house, drum 'n' bass, breakbeat, IDM, dub techno and more – had found their places in clubbers' hearts.

A number of the artists mentioned here, along with newcomers like Coptic Rain, April Nine and Strelnikoff, appeared on the 'Trans Slovenia Express' compilation issued on Mute in 1993. Presenting 15 reworkings of Kraftwerk tunes, it was a momentous release because it united the first and second generations of Slovenian electronic pioneers. With the advent of capitalism and globalisation, however, there's no doubt that something was lost in terms of a distinctly Yugoslav/Slovenian aura that had characterised the music of the 80s.

Mainstream artists reigned supreme in the late 1990s and the opening years of the new millennium, but bands like The Stroj and Bast, plus others from the realms of noise, continued their existence underground. Another wave of alternative music has taken hold in the past decade, with many of the trailblazers returning to their projects, and today's scene is as lively as ever. We cannot really talk about places as hubs because the artists are relatively evenly interspersed throughout the country, but most of the experimental and progressive electronic music production is happening in Ljubljana, where Radio Student remains an essential meeting point in terms of support, coverage and the diffusion of music.

One of the main labels now is Kamizdat, and I propose you start with releases by Kikimore, Shekuza, Gašper Torkar, Beepblip and Lifecutter. For further investigation, I also suggest you check the AmbientSoup imprint – especially their artists Nitz and II/III – and the first Slovenian ambient compilation, 'Senzorama Vol 1', which is on ZARŠ Records. And if you're ready to jump down the Bandcamp rabbit hole, you should focus on the young dark ambient artist Vsemag, abstract harpist Rouge-Ah, imaginary folk trio Širom, post-club duo Warrego Valles, jazztronica outfit Etceteral, and occult techno producer Alleged Witches.

It is with the support of festivals – Grounded, Sonica, Zasavje Noisefest International, Sajeta, MENT Ljubljana and others – that Slovenian electronic and experimental music artists and fans get their chance to present and discover new sonic sensibilities. Just like in the old days, it remains a tiny and fairly niche scene, but it's powered by unrelenting enthusiasm.

DARK MATTERS

NIK COLK VOID

With an impressive track record as a serial collaborator, Nik Colk Void is finally striking out on her own. Exploring some weighty ideas, her debut solo album ‘Bucked Up Space’ will have you flexing the grey stuff

WORDS: SHARON O’CONNELL

Nik Colk Void is at home in Norfolk, speaking to me from her kitchen. Not that I’d have guessed it. Directly behind her are white shelves filled with vinyl and when she flips her laptop around, I can see a mixing console and other gear on the countertop, alongside notebooks and paper. If anything is evidence of the centrality of an artist’s oeuvre to their life, it’s this.

“‘Where can I work?’ has always been my first thought whenever I’ve gone to find a place to live, rent or whatever,” she admits. “And it’s the same even though I now have a child.”

Making has always been at the heart of Void’s music – and, by extension, her life – in the sense that the doing determines the end result. Starting with a fixed idea and progressing towards its realisation has never been her way, which explains both her love of improvisation and her enthusiasm for collaboration, notably with Chris Carter and Cosey Fanni Tutti (as Carter Tutti Void), Peter Rehberg (as NPVR) and Klara Lewis.

These practices – the boldness needed to be in the moment and the openness to others’ ideas, untroubled by issues of authorial control – are signs of creative strength. Despite ticking both those boxes and her years spent playing in bands – first, twitchy art-punks KaitO, then disco-tech/industrial-house outfit Factory Floor – Void is only now releasing her debut solo album, ‘Bucked Up Space’.

It’s a set of rhythm-heavy tracks sitting at the intersection of minimal techno, four-to-the-floor rave and experimental noise, ranging from the super-lean and staccato (‘Big Breather’) to the irresistibly hectic (‘FlatTime’, a rubbery epic) and the heavily textured (‘Oversized’), recalling both Low’s latest LP, ‘Hey What’, and ‘Gas Lit’ by Divide And Dissolve. Of the title, Void says there’s always been “a kind of playful aspect” to her words, so audience analysis necessarily comes into play.

“When you work, you get so involved in what you’re doing that you don’t think about the connotations,” she reasons. “But ‘Bucked Up Space’ is about space literally being completely out of kilter. It’s talking about the solids of sound and how they’re placed together in those small areas of existence. And it’s about performing and how that space between me and the audience changes and morphs. So that was the interpretation I had of this fun title, but on the day of the announcement, I was like, ‘Oh my god, it’s completely wrong!’.”

She shrieks in mock horror.

“It sounds like a swear word – and I’m devoid of swearing.”

The record's title speaks to Void's perception of sound as something physical that has mass – as she once said, "I see sound as a solid". She mentions that she's dyslexic and explains further.

"I think it filters through the way I look at most things, including writing. I have a really methodical approach to listing things – I'm not a great reader because I get distracted by the gaps between letters – and I see that as a continuation of trying to get the information to reach my brain.

"So when I began to do music, it was almost as if I was more interested in what was happening around a sound – the reverberation or the feedback, for example. And the way that I could capture that in early stages was to literally record onto tape and slice it, like I would when I used to make films. When things were analogue, that was how they were put together, so with music, it was almost like that process was ingrained in how that sound translated into my brain."

This thinking is reflected in Void's other work, too. After completing her degree at Norwich School of Art and Design, in 2009 she moved to London to become a sculpture assistant to Young British Artists scenester Gary Hume on a project that involved using plaster to resemble polished ceramic forms, "like mannequin arms that support a balloon". Void remembers her role as challenging.

"After blowing up thousands of balloons, trying different make-ups of plaster, weights, you name it, I'd inhaled too many chemicals from the silicones and resins to make the moulds, so we agreed it was time to end the idea."

She put the money she earned to good use, interning at the then newly expanded Whitechapel Gallery. The link between her experience of sound as solid and the artwork she was drawn towards might seem tenuous, but Void agrees with it.

"No, this is bang on. It took me a while to understand that in my art, my identity is within the process of making, so it's almost an investigative approach. This is why I don't use DAW or computers too much, and why I've stuck with analogue and modular and synths and things – it's because I can't see into the future how that sound is going to happen."

She agrees that 'Bucked Up Space' is the result of the largely random course of its own creation.

"I think that's why it's taken me a long time to actually put things down into an album. As I've been going along, I've made so many recordings that I've forgotten about, because they existed to me at the time of making and so have that immediacy.

"Another way that sound influenced me was feeling its live power as an audience and how that moved me. The excitement and the shock of it gave me a real sense of being alive. But with improvisation as a performer it's not just the sound, it's also a whole mental aspect of you not knowing how it's going to come out. It's a way to push yourself forward and also to learn about yourself – how you cope with it, in a situation in front of an audience."

That must be both exhilarating, because of the need to be completely in the moment, and utterly terrifying.

"Yeah, it is terrifying," laughs Void, though she adds that since she has no concept of the music being "right" in any particular way, it's less scary than it might have been.

"I can never see it actually going wrong, because it is what it is and your response to that is what you learn after improvising for a long time, with different performers and in collaborations," she explains.

"That was part of my learning process up to the point where I felt, 'I can formulate this into a record now that I've figured out who I am within this world of improvisation'."

It seems Peter Rehberg reckoned Void had reached that point in 2016. The Editions Mego boss, who died suddenly last year, asked her then if she would make a solo LP for the label, but she felt that the timing wasn't right.

"I've always had the idea of doing a solo record," she explains. "But I am not one of those artists who like to work on my own. The excitement of music for me is that I have real relationships with my collaborators. The whole journey is what I feel is the overall part of making music and art, so I wasn't quite ready to do something on my own. I'd been a huge fan of Peter with KTL [Rehberg's project with Stephen O'Malley of Sunn O)))] so I said, 'Shall we do a record together?'."

However, Void's hesitancy in launching a solo career wasn't due solely to wanting more partnership experience under her belt. Factory Floor and Carter Tutti Void were very different projects but what they had in common was the need for her to fit within a three-person structure, "to sort of please and have some dialogue with the people I was working with".

"But with Peter, it was a whole new world that I wanted to explore before I could go off and do my own records," she continues. "We had a very good friendship and he was definitely a Throbbing Gristle and Einstürzende Neubauten fan, but he linked that with extreme experimental things like Thomas Brinkmann and brought those two spheres together.

"I saw that was how I was, as well. I have this, I wouldn't say commercial aesthetic, but more a part of me that wanted to make music that didn't alienate my audience. So some of the stuff is structured and the other side of it is experimental."

‘Bucked Up Space’ is a major step for the shapeshifting Void, whose fascination with sound kicked in at an early age when she lived with her father.

“He used to make these systems where he would have old speakers that he would connect together,” she remembers. “And he would then listen at full blast to things like The Beatles or Billy Joel.”

Void took guitar lessons for four years from the age of eight, but more influential in her teens were the bands her older brother and sister listened to “super loud”, like The Jesus And Mary Chain. These experiences led Void to buy her first guitar – a hollow-body Epiphone – “to follow The Jesus And Mary Chain’s chord progressions”.

“Then I got into Sonic Youth and more of the American music, like Sebadoh,” she explains. “The noisy guitar sound was really exciting to me, as opposed to what was going on in the UK, which was more Britpop. It also had a kind of free element to it. There were times when I’d think, ‘Why didn’t I exist in the 1980s new wave scene in New York?!’.”

In terms of UK music, Wire played a role in galvanising Void early on, both sonically and visually. She found harmony difficult so would try to find ways around it and in that respect, Robert Gotobed’s drumming – with its repetitive, loop-like rhythms lending space to the other instruments – was a revelation.

“Maybe this was my first understanding of occupying space and how it can function within a group,” she considers. “I liked how Colin Newman looked onstage – like he’d just left the office. I know this happened a few decades before I started out but I felt I had to go backwards to understand how to go forwards. This opened up to me how underplaying your personality gives focus to the work itself.”

Of course, there are several mountains’ worth of material which have indirectly had an impact on Void and when asked which three records she’s most in awe of, she claims, quite reasonably, that she “can’t do it in three”. However, Glenn Branca’s ‘The Ascension’, ‘A’ by Pan Sonic and ‘Endless Summer’ by Fennesz are up there.

“‘The Ascension’ drowns in the power of the guitar and when I first heard it, I felt the sense of frustration against tradition,” says Void of why she rates it. “It’s aggressive in nature, but retains the beauty in its order. It’s timeless, and its melting of genres makes it out of the box. It totally shook up my idea of guitar playing and made me aware I could ‘own it’ at a time when I was about to give it up.”

As for ‘A’, it’s Pan Sonic’s refusal of the hierarchical ordering of sounds that most appeals.

“Every sound has an important role within the spatial positioning,” she explains. “‘A’ gives off a unity vibe with raw content and somehow translates as a very different record when played at high and low volumes in different situations – it’s so versatile.”

‘Endless Summer’, meanwhile, strikes a “perfect balance” that’s typical of Fennesz’s work.

“Electronics and computer music merged with acoustic and electric guitar deliver a language unique to Christian Fennesz,” says Void. “It’s one of those records whose content is so poignant you can’t get it out of your head but you can’t exactly hum it, either. It’s emotional and I never tire of listening to it.”

If the past is illuminating and the present a prime mover in Nik Colk Void’s methodology, then the future is her driver. With the release of her solo debut album, she’s already engaged with several new projects, including an album with Klara Lewis. It’s been in process for four years, but is now in its final stages and will be released on Editions Mego as per Rehberg’s original schedule. There’s also an album with Alexander Tucker, as Brood X Cycles, which is due in the summer, and more recording with Factory Floor is on the cards.

Away from music, after five years on a waiting list, Void recently secured a studio space near her home and has painted it, ready to start work on her art again.

“I really like the idea of taking ‘Bucked Up Space’ to the visual level,” she enthuses. “And I’m quite excited about coming back to my sculpture-making roots.”

By any measure, that’s the itinerary of one extremely industrious artist.

“Well, you know – it’s what I do,” laughs Void.

‘Bucked Up Space’ is out now on Editions Mego

CAMEO
OUTSIDER
Trigger

SHIFTING UP A GEAR

His was the name on everybody's lips when 'Nightcall' featured on the 'Drive' soundtrack... and then nothing. After almost a decade of silence, Kavinsky is back with a new album, 'Reborn'. Fasten your seatbelts

WORDS: FINLAY MILLIGAN
PICTURES: ANDRÉ CHEMETOFF

The neon-drenched skies of Los Angeles, the squeal of rubber on asphalt and a scorpion jacket. It was in 2011 that Nicolas Winding Refn's 'Drive' skidded onto the big screen and set the world ablaze with its effortlessly stylish visuals and score.

Regular readers will remember Electronic Sound covering the impact of the soundtrack back in issue 80, and there was one element of the film that stood out to everyone, even those who may not otherwise have thought much of it. After the opening car chase where Ryan Gosling's silent protagonist flees from the police, we're greeted with a sweeping shot of LA, vibrant purple credits and the thumping synth lines of Kavinsky's 'Nightcall'.

"The funny thing is, I only found out where my track was actually included in the film when I went to see it," laughs Kavinsky. "I wasn't aware it would be used in the opening."

'Nightcall' was a huge hit, a leisurely cruise of bright synths and soft vocal melody that left its tyre marks firmly on the electronic canon, massively influencing the reviving genre of 80s-tinged synthwave.

"I was floored by the reaction of people listening to my stuff for the first time, especially through a movie I really liked. I was just full of joy like a kid!"

Two years later, Kavinsky followed up with his debut album, 'OutRun'. And then he vanished.

At this point, we should clarify that Kavinsky isn't actually real. The alias refers to a character created by French musician Vincent Belorgey (who bears a striking resemblance to Kavinsky). The story goes that, having crashed his Ferrari Testarossa in 1986, a zombified Kavinsky reappears in 2006 to make electronic music, releasing his 'Teddy Boy' EP, with subsequent EPs '1986' and 'Blazer' following in 2007 and 2008 respectively.

In order to understand Kavinsky's original story, we must turn the clock back to a time before 'Nightcall', when Belorgey was in a somewhat more theatrical lane. It involves the filmmaker Quentin Dupieux, who is also a familiar face on the French electronic scene. You probably know him better as Mr Oizo.

"I started acting thanks to my friend Mr Oizo. I was basically doing it because of him," says Belorgey.

He starred in a couple of Dupieux's films – his 2001 debut, 'Nonfilm', and 2007's 'Steak' – and also had roles in the 2004 Belgian black comedy 'Aaltra' and French drama 'Ultranova' the following year.

"But I never considered doing it professionally," stresses Belorgey. "It was always through friends that I found myself in films. It was never my goal to make a career out of it. I did it for my friends and because it was fun."

It was also because of Dupieux that Belorgey started composing.

"Mr Oizo once lent me a computer," he admits. "Before that, I had only ever used a computer for playing video games, but I discovered this Logic software on it. So I started making music basically thanks to that computer, back in 2003."

Influenced by rap, jazz, funk, rock and film soundtracks, the rest, as they say, is history. As well as Mr Oizo, Belorgey has crossed paths with many a fine innovator of the French electronic scene, including composer Sébastien Akchoté-Bozovi (known as SebastiAn), house duo Justice, and Guy-Manuel De Homem-Christo, one half of Daft Punk. Was it purely friendship that drew this map of musique électronique?

"Yeah, it's definitely just by meeting a friend who introduces you to another friend, who introduces you to another friend and so on. It's a pretty small world, so you end up knowing quite a lot of people in the end."

It's been nine years since Kavinsky released his debut 'OutRun', and apart from a couple of single releases taken from it, he's been essentially off-grid. His reappearance at the end of last year was marked with the release of new single 'Renegade' and the announcement of 'Reborn', his new long-player. A fresh chapter in the Kavinsky saga, then. But the world is a very different place from the one our undead electronic trailblazer was introduced to in 2006. Heck, it's an entirely new decade. What has he been up to in the intervening years?

"I really wanted to get some perspective on my music and what I was doing back then," he explains. "I needed time to work out what to do next, especially with 'Nightcall' being such a huge success. But I also had to take some time to enjoy myself and do fun stuff I wasn't able to do beforehand."

What fun stuff, you might ask? Belorgey sums it up neatly.

"Buying new cars and travelling."

You won't see him nipping for a pint of milk in a Testarossa, though. He's a big fan of German cars, especially the Mercedes-AMG.

"It's sort of a happy coincidence that my music was in 'Drive' because I actually love driving," he laughs. "So I did a lot of that and also partying – just enjoying myself! But when the party was over, I needed to go back to work with some new people and make some new music."

All good things must come to an end, as the saying goes. So, recharged and ready to rock, Kavinsky joined forces with French composer Victor Le Masne, who served as co-producer (along with Garspard Augé of Justice) on what would become 'Reborn'.

You could *almost* call 'Reborn' a bit of a departure for Kavinsky. While lush cinematic synths are still a firm foundation of the record (opener 'Pulsar' sets the tone nicely – a glorious, mellow cruise of shivering electronic textures and swirling melodic whines), 'Reborn' on the whole is a far more vocal affair. 'Goodbye' features sombre piano keys alongside the breathy voice of French synthpopper Sébastien Tellier (another alumnus of Quentin Dupieux's 'Nonfilm'). American hip hop artist Cautious Clay lends a soulful edge to the funky 'Renegade', while the punchy delights of 'Cameo' make excellent use of American singer and rising star Kareen Lomax. The inclusion of more songs, Belorgey affirms, was a conscious decision.

"For this album, I really wanted to work with other people and come up with vocals, ideas and lyrics," he says. "And for it to be a collaborative process."

There's one name that crops up several times on 'Reborn'. Morgan Phalen, guitarist of New York City indie rockers Diamond Nights, features on 'Plasma', 'Zenith' and 'Vigilante'. Phalen had previously done two albums with Justice, providing vocals on 'On'N'On' and 'New Lands' from 'Audio, Video, Disco' in 2011, and on 'Pleasure' and 'Randy' from 2016's 'Woman'.

"I discovered him because of his band," reveals Belorgey. "But it was actually the Justice guys who mentioned him when I was looking for vocalists. They made the introduction and we started working on songs – toplines, vocal melodies and ideas – on the phone, and then when I thought we were ready, he kindly came to Paris to record."

Phalen features on 'Zenith', one of the album's most significant tracks and a companion piece to 'Nightcall', whose story focuses on our zombie protagonist visiting his ex-girlfriend to tell her he's changed, only to find out she's moved on. In 'Zenith', the script is flipped and it's a duet between the ex-girlfriend and Kavinsky. Phalen provides the male vocal, while Prudence, aka Olivia Merilahti (former member of French-Finnish indie pop band The Dø), contributes the ex-girlfriend's part.

"We didn't go to the studio with the idea of making a sequel to 'Nightcall'," insists Belorgey. "But we found this new song we were working on was starting to sound quite like it. I thought it would be an interesting idea to do a follow-up where the girl isn't singing on the chorus anymore but instead sings the verses. It's kind of a mirror track of 'Nightcall' in a way."

Belorgey concedes that while it can be more difficult to partner with others rather than toiling away on instrumentals by yourself, in the end he was grateful for the experience and what it led to.

"The process was sometimes faster, sometimes slower, but I was really glad to meet people like Morgan Phalen. He was supposed to sing on just one song, but we enjoyed working together so much that I asked him to sing on four songs in the end."

And what about the Kavinsky character? Does his story continue throughout 'Reborn'? In a sense, yes, but Belorgey stresses that he'd like your imagination to fill in the gaps.

"With my first album I set up the background story. For this one, I wanted to let people imagine what was happening to this character. Let them listen to the music and figure out for themselves what the story is, rather than me telling them exactly what happens."

Little wonder that this new record is called 'Reborn' – it almost feels as if Kavinsky is reintroducing himself, building on the legacy he started when the world discovered him through 'Drive'.

"I really found the word 'reborn' to be quite strong," says Belorgey. "It definitely embodies the fact that this is more than just a comeback – it's also a rebirth. I came up with a brand-new sound on this album, with real instruments and a new mix that's more lush and wider than before."

On the subject of those real instruments, Belorgey explains he chose to go in a different direction with 'Reborn'. 'OutRun' used a lot of samples and plugins, but this record is 100 per cent analogue. And while he's keeping coy about exactly which instruments he used, he gives us a few tidbits.

"I never like to disclose the gear I use, but all I can say is that I love the sound of a Prophet."

There's a level of expectation with any new release, not least from someone who has produced a track as seminal as 'Nightcall'. So is he feeling the pressure?

"Pressure is definitely there. But there is always pressure involved when you put out a new album. Especially when you haven't released anything for nine years."

And what about the future? On the immediate horizon, he's got some gigs later in the year to prepare for.

"As we speak, I'm working on the live shows. I'm preparing myself for some dates in the US at the start of June."

What then, though? Will he vanish for another decade?

"It depends on whether 'Reborn' is successful or not!" he laughs. "No, I really want to make my next album more quickly. I think I've taken enough holidays."

Thank goodness for that. Because if 'Reborn' is anything to go by, Vincent Belorgey is far from done. Start the Testarossa and make sure it has a full tank. Kavinsky's got a lot more rubber to burn.

'Reborn' is out now on Fiction

GALE FORCE

From upfront electropop and reflective spoken-word sonics, drawing on everything from jazz to dancefloor bangers, to her latest detour into mellow abstract moods as Whatever The Weather, we dare you to pigeonhole the musical whirlwind that is Loraine James

WORDS: STEPHEN DALTON
PICTURES: NORA NORD

Listening to Loraine James is like stepping into a limitless kaleidoscopic dreamscape of voluptuous textures, kinetic beats and liquid melodies. The young north London-born composer and producer is only 26, but she has already amassed an impressively broad body of work across four albums, a handful of EPs, a wealth of extraneous online material and multiple collaborations.

A genre-blurring omnivore, James has seen her work described as ambient, IDM, jazz, hip hop, trap, glitch, techno, drill, drum 'n' bass, club music and more. She responds with an open-minded shrug, welcoming "anything people want to call it".

James began to earn international attention in 2019 with her first album for the feted experimental label Hyperdub. 'For You And I' is a ravishing collection of rhythmically adventurous avant-pop, lush electro-soul and nervy musings on her own black queer identity. Its 2021 sequel, 'Reflection', recorded in the depths of lockdown, expanded her sonic vocabulary to more confessional, personal, spoken-word pieces, with a gallery of guest vocalists and a heightened edge of political urgency.

For her latest project, James has shapeshifted again, adopting a new alias, Whatever The Weather, to release a self-titled album of sumptuous post-ambient sound paintings on the Brooklyn-based bespoke electronica label Ghostly International. Full of sonic sunshine, airy choral birdsong, frosty crackle and digital fizz, the album combines newly recorded material with tracks from an extensive archive of buried treasure that was just waiting for the right vehicle.

"There were some pieces from a few years ago that I'd been sitting on," James tells me from her London home. "I could never imagine releasing them under my own name, so I just thought it would be cool to start a new name. I'd been a fan of Ghostly for years, so it seemed perfect to go with them. My Loraine James stuff is always changing anyway, but this is less song-y, with less structure to it, which I've always loved doing. It's a nice opportunity to make songs endless, to not necessarily have to trim them down like a radio single. It's a different side to the whole thing."

Working in a more free-flowing, improvisational manner than on her more official artist albums, James names each track on 'Whatever The Weather' after a temperature, zigzagging up and down the thermometer from zero to 36°C. The connection between tunes and titles, she explains, is tenuous but not entirely random.

"It's mostly just about the warmth or coldness of a track," James says. "I didn't know what I was going to do with my song titles. They're always the last thing on my mind. I choose most of them based on how I feel."

Her favourite tracks on the album span the full temperature range, but she admits to a preference for warmer weather.

"I get so miserable when winter comes. I like spring and autumn – those are my favourite seasons."

James grew up on the Alma Estate in Enfield. Traditionally a working-class community, it is now being gentrified and replaced with expensive private housing, a pattern repeated right across London. She paid bittersweet tribute to the changing face of her former high-rise home on the cover of 'For You And I', dedicating the album to the estate because "it made me who I am".

From childhood, she was something of an eclectic musical magpie. Her teacher mother, a second-generation Jamaican immigrant, played in a steel drum band and surrounded her two daughters with music, from calypso to funk to heavy metal. James began taking piano lessons at six and developed wide tastes in her teens. Alongside more experimental artists like Aphex Twin, Holly Herndon, Telefon Tel Aviv and L'usine, she also nurtured a passion for post-hardcore, math-rock and emo guitar bands like Paramore, Deftones, Enter Shikari and American Football. Indeed, she still has tattoos celebrating rockers TTNG and Circa Survive alongside many others, including a domino tattoo in tribute to her Caribbean heritage.

But while James is unlikely to make a rock album any time soon, her headbanger tastes have not entirely faded. She sometimes composes tracks on MIDI guitar and paid jokey homage to Metallica on one early record.

"I started listening to Paramore again recently," she says with a smile. "And American Football. I always go a few years and then start listening to that stuff again. I've made lots of Spotify playlists."

James began to find her voice as an electronic composer at Westminster University, where she met future regular collaborator and south London rapper Le3 bLACK and began work on her debut album. Her degree course was officially in commercial music. So where did it all go wrong, Loraine?

"Ha! Oh yeah, I don't understand why it's called that," she grins. "We could make whatever we wanted – you didn't have to make pop music. Some people were making Bonobo-inspired stuff, some were making dancehall…"

As it happens, the course proved invaluable for James, especially the live performance module, which gave her the confidence to translate her keyboard, laptop and MIDI ideas to a club stage.

"I didn't even know you could do my music as live performance," she recalls. "I did a dissertation on electronic music as well because I was seeing a lot of people I liked – Shigeto and stuff like that. I think I did that module six months before I did any live performances. And I made my first album for my final-year project, which was called 'Details', on Bandcamp."

It may not enjoy the same critical attention that James earned with her later albums on Hyperdub, but 'Details' was a fantastically assured debut statement for a young artist barely out of her teens. An ambitious feast of head-spinning alt-pop, glitchy hip hop and luminous jazztronica, it also contains a lush, audio-collage spoken-word piece, 'Queer Space', which shines a light on the communal "found family" bonds between LGBT outsiders like James.

She returned to the theme of sexuality from a more personal angle with the track 'Hand Drops' on 'For You And I', expressing her nervy reluctance about even holding her partner's hand in public and addressing her ever-present fear of receiving homophobic abuse. Despite living in broadly liberal, diverse, multicultural London, James believes bigots have been emboldened by the current political climate, notably a government led by a Prime Minister with a track record of slurring LGBT people and other marginalised groups.

"I'm not an affectionate person in public anyway," she explains. "But I'm even less likely to do that now. I'd rather just walk around and not be spoken to, but it feels like people have more balls to say something they dislike now. I think the climate has changed. A lot of people in power have, like, funky views on stuff – they say it on TV and it has no repercussions, so it's easier for other people to say it too and nothing happens. They know it doesn't affect them – they can't be touched because of who is higher up. Not necessarily the Prime Minister, but just in general."

Angered by the police murder of George Floyd and galvanised by the Black Lives Matter movement, James has also addressed racial inequality on tracks like 'London Ting // Dark As Fuck' from 'For You And I' and 'Simple Stuff' from 'Reflection'. Sung by James, the latter is a tender, mournful plea for basic human rights. She has worked with a wide range of artists from different ethnic backgrounds, but the muted response to racism among her electronic music peers led her to the uncomfortable conclusion that "white people just want to see themselves on the dancefloor". Since returning to playing live last summer, however, James says she has noticed some positive progress.

"I do feel a difference from before the pandemic," she nods. "There's definitely an attempt to make it more equal, to book more POC or queer acts and stuff. But it's a weird one because sometimes you think they're just doing it so people won't call them out, so it's a sticky thing. I often don't know how I feel about it because I'm thinking, 'Am I just asked because I'm black, just to make it appear a certain way?'."

As a queer black woman in electronic music, James is acutely conscious of her minority status. But she is also wary of any obligation to embody her various identities as some kind of envoy.

"That word, to 'represent…', I just find it hard," she frowns. "Like, I'm just doing whatever, you know what I mean? And if that touches someone then that means a lot to me, but I'm not really trying to be a leader of the people. Obviously I represent being this and being that, but I don't feel like a spokesperson for anything. Nor do I want to be. I just want to do my thing. Yeah, I want to show that there are many of us doing cool stuff, but I don't want to act like I'm the bossman of the whole thing."

For all her glowing reviews and growing international profile, James comes across as a charmingly shy, modest, sweet soul. She hates the sound of her own voice, frets anxiously ahead of playing live and fears a negative reaction every time she releases new material. Given her track record of rapturous media praise and prestige live bookings, we might expect her to have overcome her imposter syndrome by now. But she shrugs this off with a pained smile.

"I don't know, ha! I'm just winging it, honestly," she says. "I was really nervous about 'Reflection' because you could say it's less experimental than 'For You And I'. There were a lot of guest vocalists on it as well, and I know sometimes people are a bit iffy about that… but pfff, who knows? I don't like to worry about what people will think. I was more, 'I think this will be cool'. I want to keep that mentality."

There is no sign of a critical backlash against James, but she is still warily scanning the horizon.

"I'm always waiting for it," she claims. "Next time, maybe. Next album. It will happen. It's impossible to make a 'good' record every time. Just the main thing is as long as I think it's somewhat decent myself."

She is particularly self-conscious about addressing personal subject matter in her music.

"I feel more nervous showing it to the world, definitely," she says. "Especially the songs with my vocals on because I'm not a singer at all. I was so stressed, and when 'Simple Stuff' was the first single I was like, 'Fuck man, this is so embarrassing!'. Ha! Hearing my own voice is the worst thing. You cringe and shrivel up inside. Yeah, I can't sing but I do like doing it occasionally. And having to sing it live… oh man, that's another thing. I'm working on it."

So is Loraine James ready to unleash her full Beyoncé side yet?

"No, ha! Next album. I'm slowly building confidence."

After the more confessional material on 'For You And I' and 'Reflection', she sees 'Whatever The Weather' as a relaxing detour into more abstract, opaque forms of self-expression. It's only the start of her secondary alias, she says, with many more magical meteorological dreamscapes to come.

"Before 'For You And I', I wasn't really emotionally attached to any of the music I'd made. I didn't put my life experience into my work at all. People expect every piece you make to mean something deep, but I'm like, 'Naah, this just makes me feel happy! The end'. Ha! So it was really nice to do a project based on the feel or the mood. I don't always like telling people that this song means this anyway, because you can listen to a piece and it can suggest something completely different to you. I like to keep it open."

'Whatever The Weather' is out now on Ghostly International

ROCK MUSIC

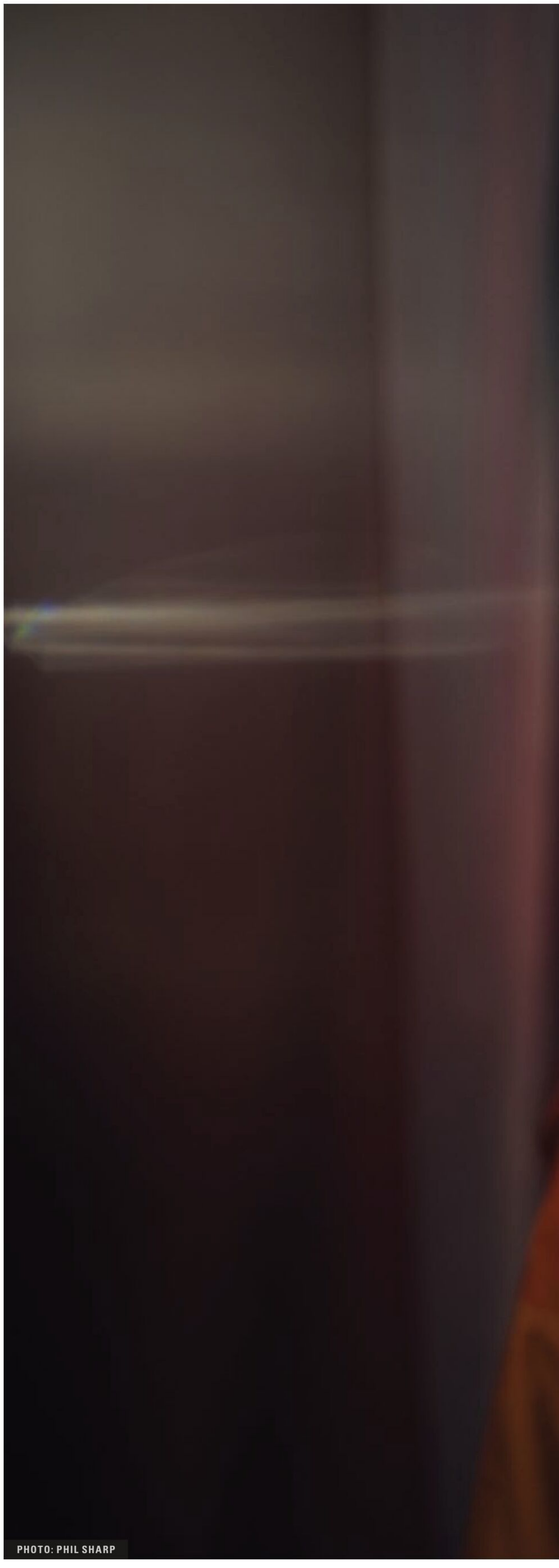


PHOTO: PHIL SHARP

‘The Unfolding’ is Hannah Peel’s timeless collaboration with Paraorchestra. Inspired by the imprints of life beneath our feet, it’s a document of all of Earth’s incredible history – in 54 minutes

WORDS: MATT PARKER

Have you ever wondered what the formation of a planet sounds like? Or whether rocks sing? Hannah Peel has. The Northern Irish musician and composer has taken on projects of increasingly bold range in recent years. Her 2017 album ‘Mary Casio: Journey To Cassiopeia’ incorporated a colliery brass band amid a synthy collection inspired by space and the solar system. Before that, 2016’s ‘Awake But Always Dreaming’ attempted to capture the heartbreak and confusion of her grandmother’s dementia. Meanwhile, 2021’s ‘Fir Wave’ saw Peel reforming Delia Derbyshire and Brian Hodgson’s library music record, ‘Electrosonic’, into a collection of pieces inspired by nature, for which she was rewarded with a Mercury Prize nomination.

But Peel’s latest release, ‘The Unfolding’, tops them all. A collaboration of planetary reach with Paraorchestra, it sees Peel set herself the challenge of documenting the Earth’s progression and, in particular, humankind’s place in that – a cacophonous, loving, miraculous and, ultimately, tragic blink-of-an-eye against an almost unimaginably vast backdrop.

PARAORCHESTRA FOUNDER AND CONDUCTOR CHARLES HAZLEWOOD WITH HANNAH PEEL

A concept of enormous scale, it grew slowly – as is often the case with good things. The first tentative roots were planted in 2018, at which point Peel had spent so much time gazing up at the heavens for 'Mary Casio' that she had a metaphorical neck ache. For her next project, she decided to look down and ponder the world beneath her.

"I was like, 'Where do you go from space?'," says Peel. "And I was thinking, 'Well, I wouldn't mind exploring the underground and formations of rocks and geological, planetary, Earthy things'. I was starting to think about 'Fir Wave' as well. I had just moved to the coast [Peel relocated to Northern Ireland in 2018] and was also really interested in the stone sculpture work of Barbara Hepworth, as I'd lived near her artworks at the Yorkshire Sculpture Park when I was a kid. Everything fed into each other. I became really quite obsessed with rocks and how you could get an orchestra underground and perform in cavernous spaces."

You could argue that the chances of finding a partner who would light up at the musical possibilities of geology or embrace the concept of a history of the Earth in instrumental form might be slim, to say the least. But in Paraorchestra founder and conductor Charles Hazlewood, Peel stumbled across a kindred spirit.

Each had been familiar with the other's work for some time and Peel had attended several Paraorchestra shows, but they didn't meet in person until the morning following the ensemble's 2018 performance at the Barbican. Over coffee, Hazlewood found what he describes as "a really interesting and close common ground" – whether it was Hepworth's stone lifeforms (Hazlewood has his own "visceral" connection to the sculptor, having spent his childhood near her home in St Ives) or the underground, deep-listening experiments of Pauline Oliveros.

The pair also share a knack for reinventing the orchestra. Peel has frequently included classical instrumentation in her electronic work in unusual and innovative ways, while Hazlewood's Paraorchestra are a modern virtuoso ensemble that integrates professional disabled and non-disabled musicians. Blending electronic and orchestral instruments, it delights in obliterating the fourth wall between audience and musician. Much like Peel, it also has a revolving door of collaborators, including Adrian Utley of Portishead and Will Gregory of Goldfrapp.

"We breathe the same air, Hannah and I," explains Hazlewood. "We've got a lot of the same kind of values and preoccupations. Hand in glove."

Hazlewood offered Peel a commission on the spot and it wasn't long before the composer was travelling to Paraorchestra's rehearsal space in Bristol for her first research and development session.

"Our orchestra is very much *not* the traditional model, where we'd commission a composer, they'd go away, they'd write a piece and we'd perform it," explains Hazlewood. "That's absolutely *not* how we work."

Paraorchestra starts with the musicians, not the music.

"Everyone brings their own particular colour, talent, personality and passion to bear on an instrument," says Hazlewood. "So it was key for Hannah to meet the personalities. Then she could start to conceive the piece in the light of these musicians, so that when it gets to the final performance, everyone owns it in a way that they wouldn't have been able to if it had just been a bunch of dots to read on a page. It's bespoke music for very bespoke people."

Peel wanted to capitalise on the group's inimitable and lawless ability to make music well beyond the confines of a typical orchestra, to experiment yet still benefit from its organic nature.

"I chose instruments I felt were woody and underground and had a real earthiness to them to give it a deep-rooted feeling," recalls Peel. "So I worked with the bass woodwind section – a contrabassoon, bass clarinet and alto flute. I brought along a load of synths and Adrian Utley brought loads of screwdrivers and tools to hit his guitar with, and there was a drummer.

"In my head, the question I wanted to be answered was, 'Do rocks sing?'. We have waveforms of rocks and rocks shift over time, but do they make sound? And if they do, what does our planet sound like? And how does it shift? These were the massive questions I had and we had great fun exploring all of them."

Clips from the first session worked their way into the final cut of 'The Unfolding'. You can hear them on the shimmering 'Passage' or used to astonishing effect – bubbling, primal and whooping – all over the likes of 'Wild Animal' (the title is inspired by a comment performance artist Marina Abramović made about Peel). Elsewhere, you can practically hear the sun rising in soprano Victoria Oruwari's vocal on the track, 'The Unfolding'.

For an album inspired by rocks, 'The Unfolding' is full of life. Listening leaves you in awe of how it accomplishes such magnitude and sensitivity. The scale of the concept is colossal yet, in all the right ways, so was the musical resource at Peel's disposal.

"With Paraorchestra, we like to believe we offer the world in musical form," says Hazlewood. "A family of passionately engaged and enriched musicians is a pretty good playground if you want to explore the whole nature of existence, you know? It makes you think of that line about 'the world in a grain of sand'. Music is a fantastic form within which to study these issues, much more than words in a way."

Although words did play their part. Following the R&D sessions, as the first of the lockdowns began to bite, Peel discovered Robert Macfarlane's 2019 book, 'Underland: A Deep Time Journey'. It documents the acclaimed writer's explorations of subterranean spaces, underworld mythology and the clues to Earth's huge and diverse history lying hidden beneath us.

By considering humanity's damaging environmental impacts and fleeting presence against this geological timeline, it also offers existential challenges. As Simon Reynolds puts it in his review, "Nature provides for Macfarlane… a form of religion for the godless, stirring sensations of awe, gratitude, and humbling insignificance". Aligning with Peel's thinking, with an eerie resonance, this gave voice to some of her musical ideas.

"There were a couple of lines in the book about finding dark matter," she recalls. "Instead of going into space, they built caverns miles deep in order to hear. Macfarlane was saying that you have to delve into the darkness to see more clearly, and I thought it was a great statement, especially as we were in lockdown when I was actually writing this piece."

More than simply giving Peel space to think, the pandemic played its role in highlighting inequalities and paradigmatic social changes. The cultural landscape shifted and left a fertile habitat for a piece like 'The Unfolding'.

"It's perhaps a controversial thing to say, but I think the pandemic offered us an extraordinary opportunity to embrace our susceptibility – the end of this old idea of the alpha male, strutting cock, keep-calm-and-carry-on bullshit," suggests Hazlewood.

"Denying it hobbles us because you can't work at your full potential if you're constantly pretending. In a funny way, Hannah's piece meets that new sense of vulnerability head-on. We're not invincible, we're not implacable but we are greater because of our faults and our weaknesses and our challenges."

The project first came to Paraorchestra vocalist Victoria Oruwari during the confusion and uncertainty of that time – a period during which she was staying with her partner and, having lived with blindness since childhood, feeling particularly disorientated.

She remembers falling asleep with the music, willing it into her subconscious, while the titles – 'The Universe Before Matter', 'The Unfolding', 'We Are Part Mineral' – conjured escapist images. She envisioned sand dunes and primitive creatures, space travel and giant forces of the Earth. I ask her how she managed to create a relatable, personal connection with such a massive concept.

"What comes to my mind is humility," says Oruwari. "It makes you very humble. And I felt like, 'OK, it's enormous but each and every one of us is a part of this'. And that's what makes us whole. You have to give in to the sound coming out of your body and not try to affect it. You want to bring the purest version, the most genuine parts of your being, into it."

Oruwari's voice – the only one on the album – forms one of the key musical strata of the record. Her parts are usually wordless, almost as if Peel has written them like synth lines. A unique, honest energy is threaded throughout, with no ham-fisted rhymes or crowbarred meanings to distract the listener.

Peel had first seen Oruwari perform at Paraorchestra's 'The Nature Of Why' show at the Southbank Centre – a music and dance event where you could stand face to face with the players.

"I was next to her when she started to sing," recalls Peel of the show. "And I honestly felt as if my whole stomach and my heart kind of gave way. I was nearly in tears because this incredible voice was right beside me. It was just the most amazing experience to hear her sing."

Peel knew she wanted Oruwari to play a major role in 'The Unfolding', even if it's taken her until now to fully understand why.

"In some ways, her voice makes the record quite feminine," she observes. "It has that sort of Mother Nature aspect."

"Victoria *is* Mother Earth," adds Hazlewood. "She's absolutely amazing. She's a powerful, unstoppable force, like an ocean wave or something…"

Oruwari has her own take on Peel casting her, perhaps subconsciously, in this Mother Earth role.

"I think in keeping with what the psychotherapists would say, the good mother does not try to impart or affect – the good mother supports what is already there," she says. "And I was thinking, 'Be humble, and don't try to affect it'. I see the music as something precious and delicate that I have to nurture. To try to mould it into something it isn't would be cruel."

Hazlewood calls it a "divine feminine energy" and sees it as part of a wider cultural movement.

"I hope the pandemic has, once and for all, killed off the alpha-male notion because my god, we're sick of it, aren't we?" he observes. "The whole patriarchal bollocks has got to go. There's a new way, and I feel the piece has a kind of a softness and suppleness about it, which in some strange respect reflects that vulnerability.

"There's a sort of divine feminine energy about the piece. That's the power it has. It has hard edges at times, you know, and a tremendous lust for life, thundering drums, and so on – a sort of Gaia energy."

PARAORCHESTRA VOCALIST VICTORIA ORUWARI

PHOTOS: YORK TILLYER

Perhaps what's most remarkable about 'The Unfolding' is that it sounds so fresh and hopeful, despite the bleak implications of some of its source material. Macfarlane's 'Underland', for example, looks at the evidence of the Anthropocene – a term for the era during which humanity has been the dominant and scarring influence on the planet – and posits that we are rapidly approaching the end of the road, not only for other species but also our own.

Then there is the word humility, which keeps cropping up – the idea that humanity's screen time, for all our machinations and self-aggrandisement, is a mere blip upon Earth's film reel. Why then do I feel better about all this for listening to 'The Unfolding'?

Each of the interviewees – only three of the many people involved in 'The Unfolding' – has a personal interpretation. For Charles Hazlewood, the piece provides hope in its encapsulation of the rising awareness of feminine power, which he has come to view as a force for overdue change.

"There's a new energy coming in, new possibilities," he says. "It absolutely gives me cause for hope."

"It's really hard to listen to something that doesn't give you some sense of hope," adds Peel. "So for me it was a reminder about living in the present and enjoying what we have, as well as being aware of everything else. I found 'Underland' really uplifting. It's that quote about light in the darkness – you have to survey the depths of hurt and pain and other things to see more clearly. To see a different side of things."

Of 'The Unfolding', Victoria Oruwari regards the macro view of Earth's evolution – and humanity's brief flare against that backdrop – as evidence for the significance of our times.

"The music all happened and everything fades," she says. "But there's always an imprint to say something was once here."

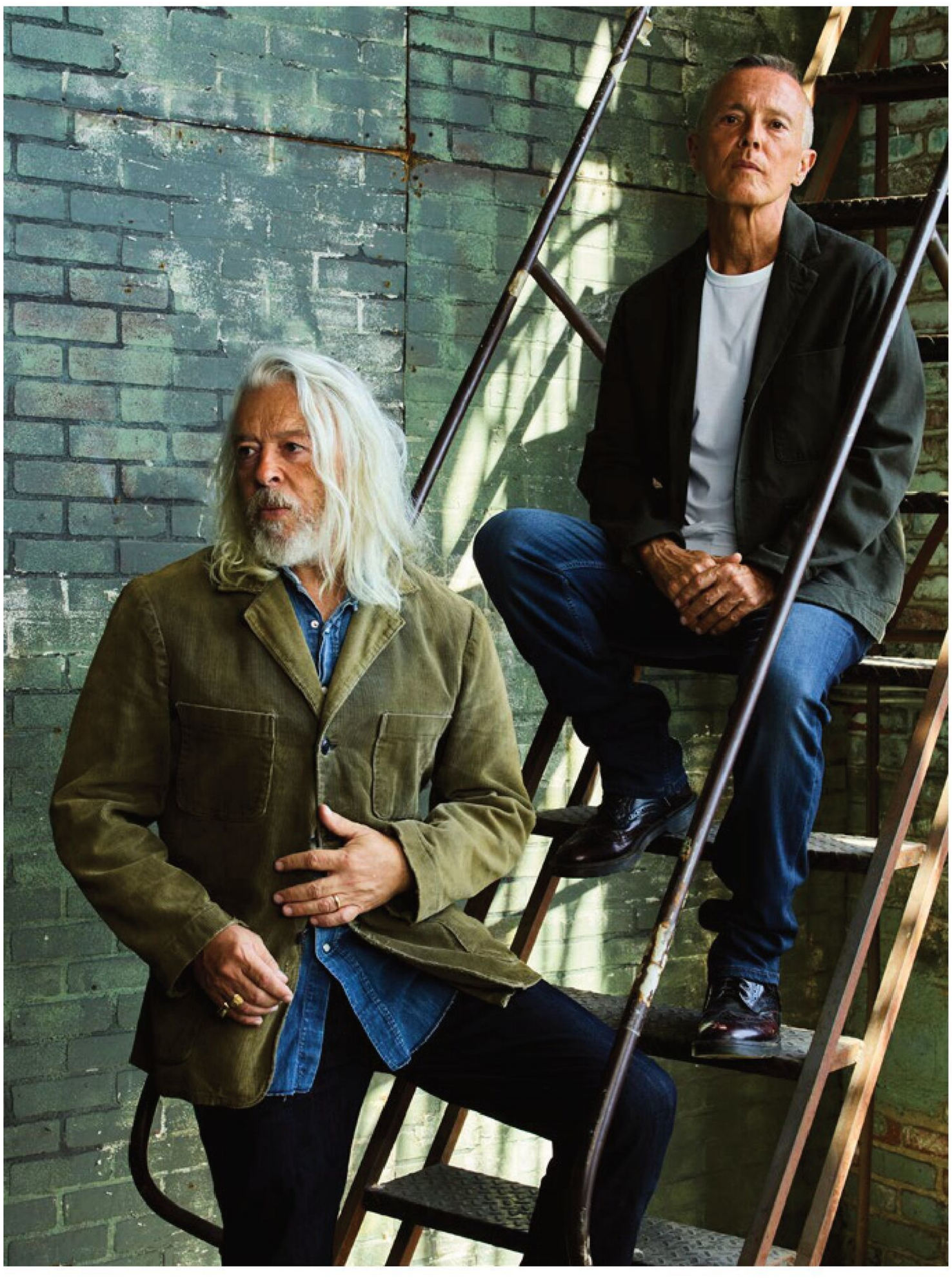
Ultimately, 'The Unfolding' is an imprint in itself which, for all its scope, complexity and musical dexterity, still comes down to 54 minutes of audio. It's a testament to the success of Hannah Peel's composition, though, that it is so thought-provoking and inviting of analysis. Even Robert Macfarlane has been moved to write a response to it.

"The music turns and tumbles in my head still, a stramash of dark matter and star-glows. It is epic and lyric. There is a grandeur to this album accompanied by modesty and even comedy at times – the absurdity of existence, its sheer, preposterous unlikeliness, comes through."

In that sense, 'The Unfolding' is the perfect encapsulation of its subject matter. One thing, everything. A light in the dark. The world in a grain of sand.

'The Unfolding' is out now on Real World

FEAR FACTORY



Celebrating the release of the first Tears For Fears album since 2004, Roland Orzabal and Curt Smith reflect on a five-decade career and talk about loss, working under duress, musique concrète and Gothic architecture

WORDS: JEREMY ALLEN

When Tears For Fears released 'Everybody Loves A Happy Ending' in 2004, Tony Blair was serving his second term as Prime Minister, the economy was booming and the threat of global nuclear annihilation seemed to have been consigned to the history books.

Eighteen years later and the band's new album, 'The Tipping Point', is finally upon us. So why has it taken so long? And is every Tears For Fears album destined to be perceived as a comeback, given their propensity to dither?

"Not really," says Roland Orzabal philosophically. He considers the question with customary parenthesis, his long, Gandalf-like argent hair and beard adding to his air of wisdom and solemnity.

He and Curt Smith are speaking to me via Zoom, with Roland calling in the early evening from his home in Bath and Curt just starting his day in Los Angeles. It took some time to coordinate this meeting as the duo now insist on doing interviews together, a show of unity and a sign that their relationship is back on track.

"It's not always about putting out a record," continues Roland. "We've been a very successful live act for quite a while. That, in itself, is extremely satisfying. We have a back catalogue. We have all these artists who have sampled us, interpolated us, covered us… so the world of Tears For Fears has expanded, regardless of us making an album. We're both quite fussy and we have what I'd call the hermit instinct, where we stay inside the cave until the weather's really good."

My next question is somewhat more long-winded and pretentious than I'd intended, but thankfully Roland laps it up. I wonder if developing a record over such a long period is like the construction of a Gothic cathedral, incorporating many different architectural trends as its shape emerges over the centuries.

"I do like the Gothic edifice analogy because I love Gothic architecture," enthuses Roland. "It's taken more than 300 years of human experience to make this record. It's crazy because we didn't start off trying to make an edifice of any grand design. We actually started off building small cottages and that's really not our style."

He extends the metaphor to reflect the recent trouble Tears For Fears had with their former management, who advised them to write with a crack songwriting team, making hits by committee. Moreover, they'd been told that releasing an album in the age of streaming would be futile. The heritage-act gravy train had no official destination.

"If you go back to the building analogy, it wasn't cottages that we were making," interjects Curt. "It was more prefab housing."

Both men are now 60 and growing older with grace – Roland has never fitted his eccentricities better, while Curt, the less talkative of the two, has the air of an aristocratic actor, poised on the live link from his Hollywood home with fabulous posture.

"The weird thing is, I'm not convinced we're insecure about what we do," reflects Curt. "I think it's really that other people make you feel insecure. When we were initially encouraged to go and write with modern writers and producers, we were like, 'OK, let's give it a try. Why not? We may learn something'. So, in that sense, we went along with it willingly, but then we discovered it really wasn't for us."

The experience gave rise to the new album's 'Master Plan' track, which takes a sarcastic swipe at the music industry à la Queen's 'Death On Two Legs'. The idea for it came to Roland as he ruminated bitterly while wandering around a Bath farmers' market.

"I did feel pissed off with our manager, because apart from trying to dissuade us from actually making a record, we weren't even able to put one song out on the internet. Just one song, that's all we asked for."

Another great track is 'My Demons', a collaboration with the Kraftwerkian-sounding producer Florian Reutter.

"He's an amazing programmer," says Curt of the German musician they met through Sacha Skarbek, the only appointed "hit-maker" to survive the songwriter-committee cull. "He was definitely fun to work with, although there's so much going on in his head. And most of the time, the trick with Florian was trying to get him to do less."

'The Tipping Point' is diverse and difficult to pigeonhole, as is much of their back catalogue, with the artistic impetus coming from adversity. The duo shook themselves free of their management contract not long before the death of Roland's first wife, Caroline, in 2017. Tears For Fears, it seems, work best creatively when under duress.

"Caroline's death was obviously a huge factor," explains Curt. "And worldwide, there was the Black Lives Matter movement, the #MeToo movement, the horrendous politics in America… and then there's climate change, and the pandemic had just started, so there was certainly enough material to mine to make something that had meaning. I just think it took us a while to realise that, lyrically, it had to have some meaning to us."

So the pair sat down in LA armed with a couple of guitars, Curt started strumming what would become album opener 'No Small Thing', and the creative floodgates opened. This was also how it had begun in 1980, when they left their mod-revival band Graduate and formed a duo called History Of Headaches. The name didn't last long and neither did the acoustic guitars.

The moment that changed everything for Curt and Roland was way back in 1979, hearing 'Are "Friends" Electric?' on Radio 1. They were at Curt's parents' flat in their home town of Bath when the sound of Tubeway Army incited what Roland describes as a "Copernican revolution".

"It was the bolt from the blue, a huge shake-up," he says. "We looked at each other and we realised that things were changing. I mean, it was bloody obvious."

Before that, Roland had been in a Simon & Garfunkel-style folk duo, playing for pocket money at a hairdresser's every Saturday morning. The mod band was a step up and they had a big hit in Spain, though Roland is dismissive of his former group. Curt, who Roland describes as a "groovy-looking guy", joined on bass, and the pair soon realised their aspirations were more serious and profound than those of their bandmates.

"They just wanted to go and record, 'There's your record, let's go play live again and pick up girls'," says Curt.

"Curt and I had a different take on things in general," adds Roland. "Partly because we're both from similar backgrounds, both council-house kids with difficult childhoods."

They were becoming audiophiles, according to Curt, who started getting Roland into David Bowie's 'Scary Monsters', King Crimson's 'Discipline' and Peter Gabriel's eponymous third album (often referred to as 'Melt'). And then along came a major stroke of luck at the local "vegetarian disco" in Bath.

"When we formed the duo, we met Ian Stanley down in Moles disco, and he was the guy with the means," says Roland. "He was the guy with the big house, with the Roland Jupiter-4 synthesiser and the CR-78 drum machine. I don't know what we would have done without him, but he gave us access to these synthesisers, so although the songs were written on guitar, it was really the arrangements of those songs that separated us from the pack."

In the early days, Tears For Fears were championed by John Peel and compared by NME to Joy Division. Then came a string of hits – 'Mad World', 'Change' and 'Pale Shelter', and a Number One album with 'The Hurting'.

Perhaps even more improbably, they were smuggling primal therapy into kids' magazine Look-in and teenage music mag Smash Hits, as well as up the charts. They became advocates of the modish psychotherapy of Arthur Janov, who had been observing their career with interest. Janov even hooked up with them for dinner the night they played the Hammersmith Odeon in 1983 and asked them to write a musical about primal therapy.

"How would that have worked?" reflects Curt. "The meeting we had with him was highly disappointing. He was a Californian man who had all the trappings of Hollywood."

"It was a bit narcissistic, which is kind of understandable," adds Roland. "I did primal therapy myself for five years – it's a great theory, but there was a cult aspect to it, and that's kind of where they make their money."

Undeterred by this episode, Tears For Fears continued to dabble in psychology in their music. The B-side to another big hit, 'Shout' (about protest rather than primal therapy), is called 'The Big Chair', a little-known track that would ultimately inspire the title of their classic second album, 'Songs From The Big Chair'.

An extraordinary piece of musique concrète, 'The Big Chair' features cut-up dialogue, courtesy of an E-MU Emulator, taken from the harrowing 1976 television film 'Sybil', about a young woman with dissociative identity (aka multiple personality) disorder.

It's typical of the experimentation that pervades their B-sides and rarities album, 'Saturnine Martial & Lunatic', on which it appears alongside a slew of tracks that are well worth checking out, most notably 'The Body Wah'. And it's all a far cry from the 1980s teen pin-ups who fathered the still ubiquitous 'Everybody Wants To Rule The World'.

"We were obviously aware of the commercial side," says Curt. "And certainly by this point we were made aware of the sales by our record company, but those B-sides were our chance to enjoy a sense of release doing something abstract. If it was a B-side, then the label didn't care, so it gave us a certain freedom to go and create something interesting for us. I think we had the best times making B-sides."

"Also, we loved David Byrne and Brian Eno," adds Roland. "They were heroes we could never get anywhere near in terms of quality, but we tried our best. On 'My Life In The Bush Of Ghosts', there's 'The Jezebel Spirit' – an Afro jungle disco track with the sound of an exorcism. We were big into that, but also we were coming at it again from the psychological angle, with the sample 'And she wants to sit beside you in your big chair' from one of Sybil's personalities. So that all resonated with us big time."

Their next long-player, 'The Seeds Of Love' in 1989, expanded the Tears For Fears sound, taking in elements of soul and psychedelia. It reportedly cost a cool one million pounds to make.

"The growth of Tears For Fears has been very much the growth of us, the formation of the ego, which culminated in 'The Seeds Of Love'," says Curt.

By the early 1990s the band had grown up and grown apart. Curt left in 1991 to make sporadic albums, start a family with his second wife and focus on presenting MTV and radio, while Roland continued to plough his own furrow, first under the Tears For Fears moniker and then in his own name.

"Originally, Curt probably experienced what it was like to be a pop star more than I did because he was fronting a lot of the singles," says Roland of their first incarnation. "We called him Boy Curt and stuff like that as a joke. But I sort of managed to bypass that, and then in the 1990s I went out and saw things. I grew my hair, put on leather trousers and was seen singing and dancing my way through Brazil. And other places."

He laughs.

"I was experiencing the excesses of the ego. I did two albums. I did two world tours. And I was sick of myself."

"I spent the 1990s coming down," confirms Curt. "I never felt all that comfortable with the fame aspect of being in the industry. But during that period, one of the things I did discover was that my love of music hadn't gone away."

"Curt made the extremely wise decision to say, 'OK, fuck the music industry, I'm going to find out who I am'," adds Roland. "And he went on that journey and it changed him. It changed us. So when we got back together, we weren't the same people."

When they were recording their sixth studio album in 2003, they also had another stroke of luck. A plaintive cover of 'Mad World' by Michael Andrews and Gary Jules scored an unlikely Christmas Number One, some 21 years after its original release as Tears For Fears' third single.

Its chart-topping success was due to it being the lead song from the soundtrack of 'Donnie Darko', the cult US movie which tapped into the band's often-explored themes of teenage alienation and mental trauma. Times had changed, but Tears For Fears had never seemed more relevant.

"There's an element of destiny involved in all of this," maintains Roland. "Does anyone do anything? What are the motivations? Do we have any free will? Or are we just puppets of God?"

Roland went through another dramatic transformation when Caroline died.

"The ego was absolutely smashed, absolutely fractured," he admits.

He had no answers, but his relationship with his bandmate "improved vastly, because he didn't have to deal with the fucking nightmare". As a result, 'The Tipping Point' is their most collaborative album since 'The Hurting', with Curt Smith singing on more songs than he has since their feted debut. Finally, Tears For Fears have come full circle.

"So we've got the restoration of some kind of balance," says Roland Orzabal. "And the rediscovery of the magic that made us a little bit special in the beginning."

'The Tipping Point' is out now on Concord

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NEO-
PLASTICISM

PLASTIKMAN & CHILLY GONZALES

Consumed In Key

TURBO RECORDINGS

A meeting of minds between two Canadian musical shapeshifters from opposite ends of the stylistic spectrum, 'Consumed In Key' is the collaborative record that no one saw coming. As Plastikman, techno artist Richie Hawtin became renowned in the 1990s for his roiling acid tracks and dank nocturnal beats, a sound he perfected on classic albums such as 'Sheet One' and 'Musik', before becoming arguably one of the most famous DJs in the world. In the other corner, Chilly Gonzales (real name Jason Beck) has a wildly varied discography that ranges from goofy and humorous hip hop (as on 2000's 'The Entertainist') to electro and house (2010's 'Ivory Tower'). His 'Solo Piano' records are beautiful instrumental works indebted to classical and jazz, and he also earned a Guinness World Record for Longest Solo Concert, playing for 27 hours straight.

This hybrid project first coalesced after Gonzales heard Plastikman's 1998 album for NovaMute, 'Consumed', a few years ago, and was intrigued by its eerie sonic structures. He began to create his own versions of the tracks on the piano, subtly embellishing the electronics with melodic gestures. Turbo Recordings boss Tiga (fellow Canadian, executive producer of this record and obviously a major electronic artist in his own right) heard these, and suggested that Gonzales send the pieces to Hawtin. The latter loved them, and fused the two elements together, resulting in 'Consumed In Key'.

Across the record, it's surprising just how well these seemingly disparate worlds go together. While Hawtin's original album is a murky and all-enveloping affair, its 'In Key' counterpart feels lighter and more sprightly, thanks to Gonzales' additions. 'Ekko' opens with a pulsing bass, but it's quickly joined by the plangent playing of Gonzales' piano, as he skips deftly across the notes, adding a bittersweet beauty to the echoing infinity of dub drone. 'Cor Ten' comes doused in seas of reverb, a deep acidic loop throbbing in what feels like a giant underground cistern. Over a slow kick drum beat, Gonzales adds espionage intrigue, his piano trills gradually becoming louder and fusing with what sounds like a zither.

'Locomotion', meanwhile, is suitably propulsive, building up a head of steam with its chugging groove and a continuous looping piano, before Gonzales decorates the track with jazzy chord flourishes. 'In Side' feels closer to outright techno, with its heavy beat, bass thump and spiralling acid bleeps that build in intensity.

What Gonzales does so well here, and throughout the record, is to make his contributions fit perfectly, leaving just the right amount of space, and knowing when to let the electronics breathe. You can picture him onstage playing along and ad-libbing over the unfurling arrangements. When the shivery strings join the picture, they serve to change the whole mood, creating a sense of filmic suspense.

'Contain' is full of dust motes and crackly susurrations, its sparse piano flourishes drifting across the dubscape, and 'Consume' has a delayed rhythm track and a simple bass riff reminiscent of Depeche Mode's 'Personal Jesus', which the pianist adds only the scantest of elements to. 'Consumed' is probably the closest we get to a dancefloor, with its urgent melodic loop, kicks and hi-hats, around which the piano curls with precision and care. And the closing 'Passage Out' is a dark ambient piece that leaves a sense of the unresolved in its sweeps of synth tone and string melodies.

Across the 10 tracks of 'Consumed In Key', it's evident that, in terms of musicality, Plastikman and Gonzales complement each other astonishingly well. While the original intent of Hawtin's record may have been quite different – a hypnotic emission from deepest techno space – here, those same dark atmospheres become more inviting and meditative rather than threatening. It helps that Gonzales has made more than his fair share of electronic beats too, so has a deep understanding of this world, and it's also to his immense credit that he heard something different in the rhythmic depths of 'Consumed'.

The album opens up the intriguing possibility of similar collaborations, and especially live performances from this duo – perhaps new compositions too. It proves that a remix can be so much more than simply a rhythmic reconstruction, putting this record among other rare gems of its ilk like Massive Attack/Mad Professor's dubby 'No Protection', or Danger Mouse's Jay-Z/Beatles mash-up, 'The Grey Album'. 'Consumed In Key' feels like a genuine and gratifying combination of Plastikman and Chilly Gonzales' highly individual talents.

BEN MURPHY

RHEINZAND
Atlantis Atlantis
MUSIC FOR DREAMS

The beguiling sophistication of this outrageously glossy, retro-modern disco album is a joy, and makes you think of better times ahead. Maybe spending time in luxe, laid-back Mediterranean clubs, along with the beautiful people. Yep, we can all dream. But the sheer, space-funk strut that this classy Belgian collective conjure up on soaring tracks like 'Facciamo L'Amore' will make you want to dance your backside off wherever you are – kitchen, garden, superyacht or otherwise. Superior. **CG**

COLE PETERS
A Certain Point Of Inertia
ROOM40

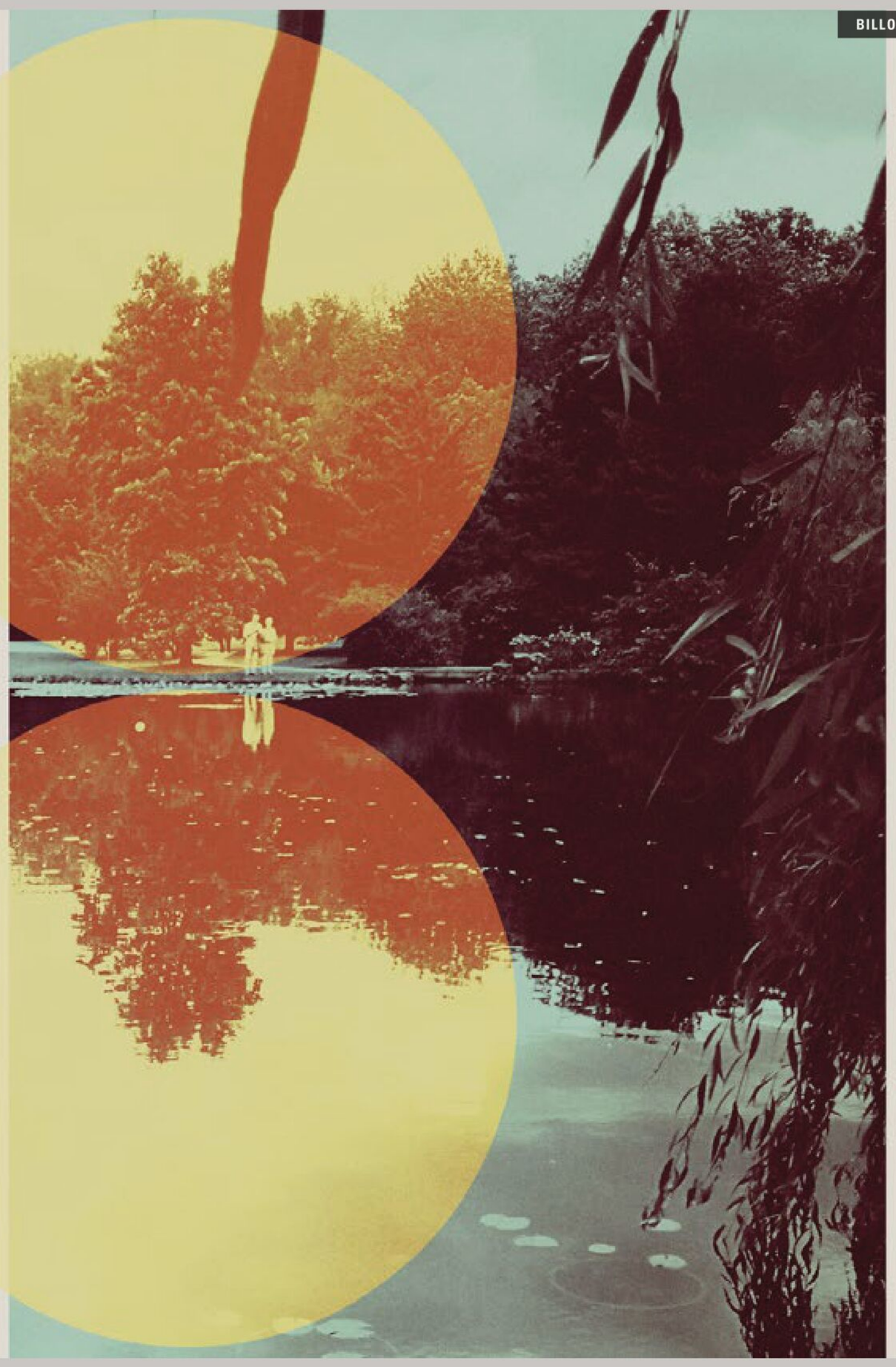
This field recording collection from Canadian visual/sound artist Cole Peters is quite the trip. 'Immersion As A Means Of Erosion' combines a fearsome storm with the drone of an aeroplane passing overhead, before being replaced by a sighing whistle. The intensity is sustained over its 14 minutes. 'Plains Music' is another long piece underpinned by the resonance of wind. Buried in this vivid dronescape is a white settler's hope for peaceful co-existence with the indigenous people of Canada's Treaty 1 and Treaty 2 territories, where the recordings were made. Powerful stuff. **MR**

REVBJELDE
Amicus
BURIED TREASURE

Another offering from Alan Gubby's Revbjelde, and this is a surprise. Gone is the motorik psych/folk of their previous outings and in comes an industrial edge. The result of live takes and overdubs, 'Amicus' is packed with rhythm, effects and a ton of processing. The infectious, almost funky 'Goose Chase' gives off heavy Sheffield vibes. Which all makes sense when you discover the spoken word and vocals come courtesy of Cabs collaborator Peter Hope and the whole shebang is mastered by I Monster's Dean Honer. A very rich journey into sound. **NM**

ANA FOSCA
Poised At The Edge Of Structure
THE HELEN SCARSDALE AGENCY

There's a section of track on the Jubilee Line near London's Canary Wharf where the train issues a metallic howl as it thunders through the tunnel. Much of the latest album from Ana Fosca (aka Copenhagen's Linn Hvid) sounds just like that, its 12 pieces freighted with angry, bloodthirstily violent, unsettling noise. Hvid's chanting on 'Causality Of The Exceeding', meanwhile, is subjected to a terrifying level of manipulation, evoking the practice of scream therapy, but where you don't feel remotely better after. Menacing, yet magnificent. **MS**



BILLOW OBSERVATORY

Stareside

FELTE

Billow Observatory is certainly an apt moniker for Danish musician Jonas Munk (Manual) and Michigan's Jason Kolb (Auburn Lull), the duo behind this soothing ambient daydream. Veering into Stars Of The Lid/Jon Hassell-esque territory, 'Stareside' – the pair's fourth album – unfurls majestically before us, all atmospheric pressure, treated guitar FX and nebulous synth drifts, peaking with the haunting 'Wash Away The Dust' and the bleary-eyed loveliness of 'Red Morning'. As ambient escapism goes, this gauzy, transcendent gem really hits the heights. Superb. **VI**

DIETER ZOBEL

MEZ 31,00 (Experimenteller Elektronik-Underground DDR 1989)

BUREAU B

It's gratifying that music from the German Democratic Republic is gaining wider recognition. For 'MEZ 31,00' (first issued in 1989), Berlin's Dieter Zobel crafted interwoven sequences with a Yamaha CX5M music computer, acquired with an inheritance from his gran. His disappointment with the CX5M's limited functionality nonetheless translates into stark, Orientalist music and no-nonsense track titles such as '35:00' and '63:00' in kinship with the minimalism of Steve Reich/Terry Riley. It certainly whets your appetite for more from the closed book that was the GDR. **SB**

SOFT AS SNOW

Bit Rot

INFINITE MACHINE

There was no shortage of gush on these pages for the first Soft As Snow outing, 2018's 'Deep Wave'. "Raw, exhilarating, playful and startlingly original," we said. Seems the Norwegian-born, Berlin-based duo of Oda Egjar Starheim and Øystein Monsen aren't resting on any laurels here. Starheim's voice is extraordinary – a Scandi-noir Clare Grogan. Imagine Altered Images if they were freshly dug from the rich, dark earth. The melodic 'Hollow' is a cracker, while the wild squiggles and swirling beats of 'Always On' should come with a shovel. **NM**

BODYSYNC

Radio Active

BANDCAMP

Hey reader, is your floor too empty? Well, Nova Scotia producer Ryan Hemsworth and former chiptune tinkerer Giraffage have some floorfillers for you. Bodysync's self-released debut twiddles its dial across every roof-raising genre you care to name. Giddy UK garage, luminous pop rave, teeth-whitening piano house. Classic dance music abounds, with perky lead single 'Body' evoking 1990s Nightcrawlers. A little gorgonzola, perhaps, but it's all energetic production fireworks, with enough frills to fluff up your floorboards. Joyous. **FR**

LOMOND CAMPBELL
Lost Loops
ONE LITTLE INDEPENDENT

The good news is that Lomond Campbell's loops are not lost, rather given a new lease of life via this limited cassette release. The lochside-dwelling Scottish producer and instrument builder "initially had no intention of releasing this music, only spooling it out and slicing it up". Fortunately spared from the cutting room floor are these singularly beautiful, sparkling compositions. From the mesmeric post-classical piano melody of 'REEL 1 PHASE 6' to the expansive, aching synth soundscapes of 'REEL 2 PHASE 2', 'Lost Loops' is a very special find. **CF**

ALONE
Hourglass Escapee
TONAL SHIFTS

Exploring analogue electropop and post-industrial "sub-styles", Belgrade-born Nikola Vitković (aka Alone) has been tinkering with synths for the best part of 30 years, culminating in this quirky but fabulously atmospheric concept album. Influenced by sci-fi writers such as JG Ballard and Stanisław Lem, and the likes of Gary Numan and Bill Nelson, Vitković's dystopian, unearthly missives could be the soundtrack to some lost, deeply cerebral Yugoslavian space movie. Standout track? That'll be 'To Whom It May Concern', which sounds like Kraftwerk and Vangelis on a gently propulsive cosmic trip. **VI**

DIP FRISO
Crocodile Or Real?
REAL LANDSCAPE

Glasgow's Dip Friso, aka Murray Collier, follows 2020's 'If The Worm Turns It Could Turn Ugly' with a sublime "ghost dub broadcast". 'Crocodile Or Real?' is a masterclass in sample alchemy, showing Collier's innate knack for rhythm and juxtaposition. The title track opens with a telephone whirring and fades out to the slowed-down strains of Edwyn Collins' 'A Girl Like You', forming a perfectly curated mixtape within a single song, while 'Storm Clouds' sounds like dubbed-out Ennio Morricone with a persistent ride cymbal. A total vibe. **CF**

CASUALLY HERE
Possible Worlds
ALGEBRA

Casually Here – London musician Nic Nell – has picked just the right time to drop his second album. His blend of electronic and acoustic traditions feels like the perfect soundtrack to the optimism and freshness of spring, with tracks such as 'Crickets' fusing piano, atmospheric field recordings and infectious, cross-rhythmic beats. It's inviting, warm and welcoming, but despite its apparent simplicity, there's also a lot of detailed work going on beneath the surface that makes repeated listens a joy too. **BW**

CONFIDENCE MAN

Tilt

HEAVENLY

Melbourne quartet Confidence Man return with their second album, and it's just as irresistibly infectious as 2018's euphoric debut, 'Confident Music For Confident People'. Once again, anthemic clubby/house bangers – sounding like a beefier Deee-Lite, perhaps – are the order of the day, veering from big beats to "hypnotic eroticas". Lead single 'Holiday' is a sure-fire party starter, while 'Feels Like A Different Thing' is a radiant pop earworm that'll stick just as hard as their 2017 breakout hit, 'Bubblegum'. Summer's here early, the dancefloor awaits. **VI**

MICHAEL ANKLIN

Mekonium

SAIS

The solo debut from Swiss drummer and producer Michael Anklin is the most uncompromising start to a career you could wish for. It's a wondrous and strange landscape of sound design and manipulated field recordings, where ancient instruments cast an instant spell, only to be subtly warped at the edges by modern technology. A special thumbs-up goes to the juddering 'Exon' but the whole seven-track journey seems to just fly by. Original, raw but sophisticated sound sorcery. **BW**

URSULA BOGNER

Sonne = Blackbox (Voice And Tape Music)

FAITICHE

Is the story of Ursula Bogner real? Sonic adventurer and Faitiche label boss Jan Jelinek says that the German musician created these pieces while working as a pharmacist throughout the 1970s and 80s. Others would say that Bogner is actually Jelinek himself. Either way, the music is incredible. 'Homöostat' is Cluster-like in its cosmic rumble, while 'Jubiläum' stutters into futuristic formations that recall the strange warmth of Laurie Anderson's 'Big Science'. Whatever the truth about Bogner, there's something truly special going on here. **ST**

SUSUMU YOKOTA

Symbol

LO RECORDINGS

Consider 'Symbol' as 'Entroducing.....' for the concert hall. Made in 2004 by Japanese producer Susumu Yokota, it's an electro-classical hybrid fashioned from samples of Tchaikovsky, Bach, Mahler, Cage and other such giants. It's joyous, and also completely unpredictable – take the courtly strings and twirling flute on 'Symbol Of Life, Love And Aesthetics', backed by a thunking beat that is Boards Of Canada in frilly baroque costume. Sadly, Yokota passed away in 2015. But with Lo preparing a run of reissues from his evergreen back catalogue, 'Symbol' is the perfect starting block. **ILS**

PENDANT
Harp
SADDLE CREEK

The brief, luminous rush of noise that opens 'Laid In Orchids', the first track from PENDANT's second album, is a hint of what's to come – euphoric electronics inspired by the heady escapism of 1990s rave. Los Angeles-via-Oakland musician Chris Adams is always evolving, from stints in hardcore bands to the shoegaze pop of his 2019 PENDANT debut 'Through A Coil'. On 'Harp' he's just as comfortable making idiosyncratic dance music, whether it's the R&B breaks shake-up of the tile track, the hip hop inflected noise-punk of 'Thorn' or the slow glitchy pop of 'Latex Heart'. **CF**

ISAMBARD KHROUSTALIOV
Shanzhai Acid
NOT APPLICABLE

Award-winning London sound designer Sam Britton (Leverton Fox, Fiium Shaarrk, Icarus) has long championed AI. Icarus' 'Fake Fish Distribution' from 2012 used generative software to create 1,000 unique albums, and here, as Isambard Khroustaliov, he rides the machine-learning beast as it interacts with modular synthesis. In the warm washes and juddery glitches of 'Quixotic Algorithmic Hubris', or on 'The Hand Of Mutt' – like trying to tune into alien comms, but never quite getting there – you can almost feel Britton wrestling to contain the mesh of old and new tech. The machines are alive. **NM**

OHYUNG
Imagine Naked!
NNA TAPES

The abundance of exclamation marks in OHYUNG's album and track titles suggests an inherent quirkiness that might deter some from even listening, but don't be put off. The Brooklyn producer has pulled together a batch of delicate and melodic ambient pieces, all of which radiate atmospheric warmth while delivering unexpected emotional resonance. On 'My Hands Hold Flora!', lush drones are conjured from found sound clutter, while 'Symphonies Sweeping!' takes that same magnetic atmosphere and stretches it into wide, magical vistas. **ST**

VARIOUS ARTISTS
Emerging V/A
CULTIVATED ELECTRONICS LTD

The vinyl-only sister label to scene stalwarts EPM, Cultivated Electronics Ltd bring us eight standout tracks from new artists across the globe. The restless rhythms of electro are the central theme, but embellished with different flavours from across the electronic spectrum. Moscow's Sergey Timoshov adds burrowing minimal techno arpeggios on 'Electro Beats 1', Cardiff's Fazack fuses harsh drum patterns with soft, Bukem-esque pads on 'Weightless', and everyone featured here generally goes the extra mile to avoid the predictable. **BW**

JÖRG THOMASIUS
Acht Gesänge Der Schwarzen Hunde (Experimenteller Elektronik-Underground DDR 1980-1990)
BUREAU B

Another compelling release from the GDR archives via Bureau B, this collection by East Berlin-born electronic dabbler Jörg "Tomato" Thomasius reveals an artist of wide-ranging vision. Playful, experimental sonics, elegiac sounds and fanciful asides recall the likes of Conrad Schnitzler – who Thomasius later collaborated with – and it's a highly original album that holds your interest throughout. A succession of short compelling pieces is concluded by 'Meditation', which transports kosmische musik lovers to their happy place. **SB**

DAN SAMSA
Contours
APOLLO

South London's Dan Samsa occupies a rare spot between techno, jungle, euphoric jazz and complex sound art, and the finest moments on 'Contours' happen when the multi-instrumentalist lets the atmospherics take over. 'Impression', its viola recorded in the open air on the Yorkshire Dales, features spiralling processed vocals, frantic breakbeats and soundtrack-friendly synth strings, while 'Encounter' plunges deep into icy, complex textures. The subdued pulse and snarl of 'Shroud' marks the centrepiece of an eclectic, wonderfully strange debut. **MS**

MOOD TAEG
Anaphora Versions
HAPPY ROBOTS

It's quite a commute between Düsseldorf and Shanghai, so the separate factions of Mood Taeg often wind up with contrasting versions of the same tracks. This accompaniment to 2021's 'Anaphora' gathers them together, transforming left-field kosmische into a surprisingly zesty confection. Sprawling album closer 'Happiness Fragment' is honed into a toe-tapping album opener, albeit one that still references the Marxist critical theory of Guy Debord. Fans of Cluster and Harmonia will find much to love here, and owners of the original album shouldn't feel short-changed, either. **BF**

ALABASTER DEPLUME
Gold
INTERNATIONAL ANTHEM

During the summer of 2020, Manchester multi-instrumentalist Alabaster DePlume (Gus Fairbairn to his chums) invited 20-plus artists to improvise, resulting in 17 hours' worth of material. 'Gold' is what came out of that musical maze. Comprising 19 tracks, it risks becoming a headless chicken at times, but DePlume is a modern-day Pied Piper, with galvanising sing-a-longs like 'Don't Forget You're Precious', or the Sons Of Kemet-like thrills of 'Fucking Let Them', his rasping sax front and centre. Resplendent, soothing and rich in warm-hearted drama, 'Gold' brings moments of real elation. **ILS**

LE CLICHÉ
Vicarious Life
POLYTECHNIC YOUTH

While Le Cliché are described as “minimal”, the sound that Barcelona’s Irish ex-pat Gerard Ryan fires out is cranked up to 11. His pumping, left-field, 1980s-style electropop is so beefy it almost moos. The bass rumble and runaway synths of the tempo-shifting ‘The Age Of Sound’, the VL-Tone licks in ‘Francophilia’ and the Visage with a sledgehammer of ‘All This Silence’ will slay you. This is all killer, no filler and it has found its natural home on Polytechnic Youth. Truly awesome stuff. **NM**

SVEIN RIKARD MATHISEN & JOHN DEREK BISHOP
Calm Brutalism
CURLING LEGS

‘Calm Brutalism’ marks the first pairing of guitarist Svein Rikard Mathisen and electronic musician John Derek Bishop (Tortusa), both Norwegian. Each of their pieces is named after a segment of a poem written by Mathisen. ‘Entangling’ stands out for its skipping electronics and anxious guitars, while ‘The Roads’ surrounds a menacing riff with unpredictable static and subtle pads. Described by its creators as “monumental yet vulnerable”, the music here is palpably reverential toward the misunderstood concrete grace of brutalist architecture. Le Corbusier would surely approve. **MS**

LARGE PLANTS
The Carrier
GHOST BOX

A record so steeped in the hairy traditions of late-period psych it should come packaged in an Afghan rug and reek of patchouli oil. It’s Bedford’s Jack Sharp (Wolf People), swathing downbeat wooziness in folk harmonies and impeccably wigged-out playing. ‘Marceline’ is a bluesy Peter Green shuffle, ‘No Difference’ captures the moment when the post-hippie comedown was chiselled into Deep Purple granite. And Ghost Box veterans seeking their fix of the weird will delight in ‘The Witch’ – “She came, she came / In quivering flame”. Effortlessly magical. **BF**

TWILIGHT SEQUENCE
Trees In General: And The Larch
CASTLES IN SPACE

Twilight Sequence is Sherborne-based Matthew J Saunders, formerly of Magnétophone and also operating as Assembled Minds. This 20-minute track, available as a one-sided etched 12-inch, is an evolving, unwinding modular synth composition written to accompany a film of a winter’s day in rural Dorset. It begins with the phasing, rhythmic thrumming of electronics, like an ancient machine slowly waking up and drawing power into its various appendages. Acid squelches and sirens, cloudburst strings, and twinkling arpeggios are then skilfully marshalled to create a rather wonderful field trip. **JB**

KING GARBAGE
Heavy Metal Greasy Love
IPECAC RECORDINGS

King Garbage have unleashed a second helping of seedy barfly soul with 'Heavy Metal Greasy Love'. American duo Zach Cooper and Vic Dimotsis, nominated for a Grammy last year for their work on Jon Batiste's 'We Are', have found a new home at Mike Patton's Ipecac label, which may give you some idea of the creepy/sexy eclecticism on offer. Languorous, offbeat percussion and warm brass permeate the follow-up to 2017's 'Make It Sweat', from opener 'Checkmate' to closer 'Peanut Butter Kisses', all held together by yearning, smoky vocals and lashings of alt-R&B sass. **JA**

MICHAEL SCOTT DAWSON
Music For Listening
WE ARE BUSY BODIES

Canadian sound artist Michael Scott Dawson's instructively titled new album was designed to celebrate his rural upbringing, but it ultimately achieves something much more universal. With naturalistic field recordings and delicate composition for guitar and piano, 'Campestral' and 'Everything In Modulation' are joyfully, quietly nostalgic, evoking heartfelt recollections of untroubled moments. I listened to this album on a rush-hour walk to a London train station and even in that most clamorous of environments, 'Music For Listening' has the capacity to centre and soothe. **MS**

FRANTZVAAG
Solo Super
FUCK REALITY

Mats Frantzvaag bursts from the Oslo house scene with this straight-shooting debut album for Smallville's sweary sub-label. Belatedly unearthed from the label owner's neglected email inbox, this neat set has cymbal-drenched party pumpers, crowd-pleasing filtered vocals and elegantly euphoric dubs. Nothing fancy, just cobweb-blasting deep house fun. The smooth breaks of 'Come Later' benefit from a bass fuzzy enough to stroke. And Fuck Reality have delivered on the artwork again, with ham-fisted scrawls that make this vinyl (solo) super-collectible. **FR**

LUMINOUS FOUNDATION
Haig Fras
BELBURY MUSIC

Climbers wishing to scale the heights of Haig Fras will need Aqua-Lungs and flippers – it's an underwater mountain range near the Isles of Scilly. West Country experimentalists Neil Mortimer and Mark Pilkington have taken the plunge, using modular synths and the lapping of Cornish tides to evoke the "echinodermatic rhythms" of the ocean floor – the secret life of starfish and sea urchins. 'Jewel Anemone' shimmers and sways, 'Limpet Dance' boasts hypnotic click-clacks, and the whole affair is infused with a calming melancholy that adds immersive depth. **BF**

PICTISH TRAIL
Island Family
FIRE

"I'm just not that much of an outdoors person," shrugs Johnny "Pictish Trail" Lynch. It's a curious confession from a man who has spent the last decade in a self-built bolthole on Scotland's Isle of Eigg. But stranded there during lockdown, he began to seriously commune with the spirits of the place – quite literally in the case of the title track. "Do you suppose you're a ghost? / Then send your soul higher so we can swap roles," he chants, invoking the macabre folklore of the island with clattering beats and spiralling guitars.

Written in an isolated bothy, Lynch might not have surrendered to the elements, but he's prepared to concede a hard-fought draw. "I could never say that nature has won / But there is a fight of dynamic equilibrium," he sings on 'The River It Runs Inside Of Me'. And while 'It Came Back' boasts a squall of industrial noise, anthemic melody is never far away – 'Melody Something' is delightful dreampop with Burundi drums. An album of splendid contrasts from a similarly mercurial setting. **BF**

VARIOUS ARTISTS
Generation Blitz 2: Concrete And Chrome
STATE OF BASS

Respected music journalist and author Martin James is behind State Of Bass, originally a publishing imprint which expanded in 2021 to become a record label. Its first compilation 'Generation Blitz – Dusk To Dawn' asked a host of new synth-driven bands and artists to reimagine the sound of London's legendary Blitz club in its brief but highly influential operation, and this follow-up offers more gems influenced by that iconic era.

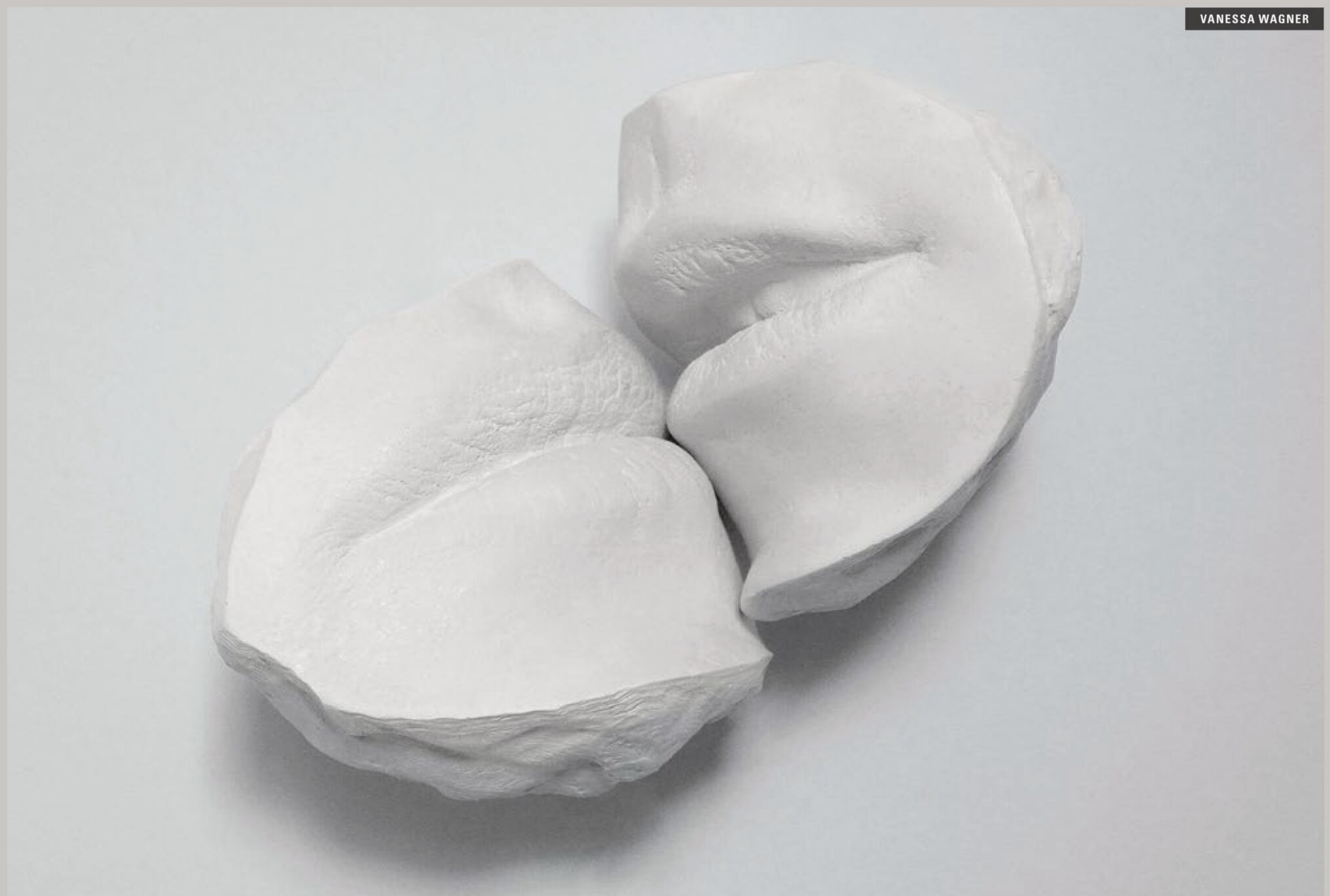
This is manifested in everything from stripped-down post-punk to glimmering electropop. Gemma Cullingford's 'Kiss You All Over' is wicked punk funk, its spoken-word vocal and driving bass reminiscent of American outfit Bush Tetras. By contrast, Mothloop's 'We Fight Together (Montage Collective Heart Stop Mix)' has more than a touch of New Order in its huge synth riffs, pumping arpeggio bass and Peter Hook-ish guitar. Boasting 36 tracks, 'Concrete And Chrome' is a feast of 80s-celebrating goodness. **BM**

VARIOUS ARTISTS
Hallow Ground Presents: Epiphanies
HALLOW GROUND

What might an epiphany sound like? This is the question Swiss label Hallow Ground put to the 16 artists commissioned for the label's first concept compilation album.

As expected, beauty is in no short measure. 'For Alice' by ex-Swans guitarist Norman Westberg opens on an unsettling synth chord, before crumbling into a sluggish membrane of cosmic steel drone, while Zurich-based synthesist Laurin Huber, presents a jumble of mundane, everyday domesticity, juxtaposing meowing felines, sliding wooden drawers and trickling tap water with a deeply resonant ambient soundscape.

Some contributions leave you scratching your head – it might take a few listens to really appreciate the genius of Akira Sileas' 'Excerpt From Piano Study', for example. Consisting of a dull, boiler room hum, momentarily interrupted by a sudden thrum before the inevitable hum returns, it's a mischievous contribution that ripples away in your mind for days after – not unlike the rest of this appealingly fanciful album. **ILS**



VANESSA WAGNER
Study Of The Invisible
INFINÉ

Chopin regarded simplicity as "the crowning reward of art". He might have appreciated this new album from French pianist Vanessa Wagner. Here, Wagner bravely strips away the electronics, computers and dense instrumental layers that characterise minimalist pieces by Philip Glass, Harold Budd, Nico Muhly and others, converting their underlying melodies into impressionistic piano performances.

But these works are often anything but simple. Modern electronic composition and the minimalist genre have rendered the humble arpeggio very difficult to replicate on a piano, as evidenced by the frantic dexterity of Wagner's playing on a standout version of Suzanne Ciani's 'Rain'. Even when simplified, the complex, underlying energy can easily be discerned.

Elsewhere, Wagner's tinkling – as on 'Lullaby' by The National's Bryce Dessner or the Eno brothers' 'Celeste' – becomes stately and austere, resulting in sounds so unequivocally classical that you'd be hard-pressed to identify them as remotely electronic in origin. Deeply mesmeric and beautiful. **MS**

VR SEX
Rough Dimension
DAIS

Drab Majesty's Andrew Clinco is the man behind this coruscating but irresistible acid-punk project. He dons the acerbic moniker Noel Skum (an anagram of Elon Musk) for a brilliantly caustic broadside that sets out both his scorn for, and fascination with, LA's seedy transgressives, who he considers "doomed to the dead ends of vanity, lust and technology". And gosh, what misanthropic thrills abound.

Bristling with fissile vitality and toxic spittle, Skum takes us on an adrenalised kick through the post-punk and gothic new wave stylings – Joy Division, PiL, Bauhaus et al – that he clearly loves. The opening salvos are belters. 'Victim Or Vixen' and 'Glutton For Love' in particular are worth the entry fee alone, the latter channelling peak-era Stranglers with perfection, right down to the spiralling Dave Greenfield-esque synths. Further in, 'Taste Of Hate' resonates with pure grit and intensity, as riotously vital as the rest of this intoxicating album. **CG**

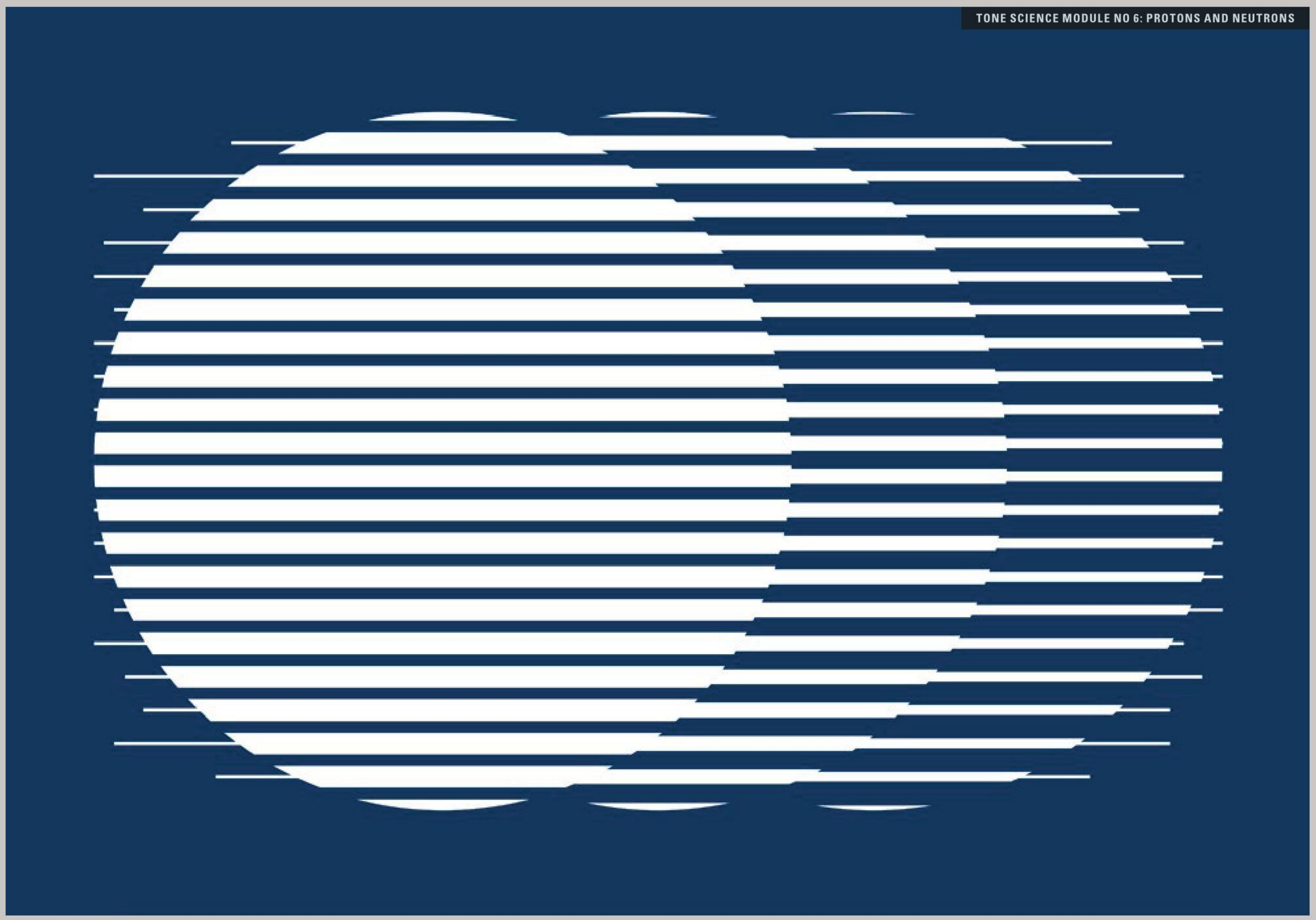
JILK
Haunted Bedrooms
CASTLES IN SPACE

Jilk are a Bristol collective of musicians who, on this second release for CiS, present a series of diverse soundscapes that have more than a whiff of the art project about them, moving between passages of sumptuous ambience and what might be a computer having indigestion.

It's an immersive if sometimes disorientating work, quirky and playful one minute, abstract and discordant the next, but there's plenty to admire in this strange, multi-faceted exhibition.

'Hope Springs In Haunted Bedrooms' is typical (if that's possible) of what's here – a cascade of piano, slip-sliding strings and a soft, chanted vocal. 'Lives In Her Eyes, Feasts On Her Tears' has a more futuristic sound, a lonely synth weaving around a hard bed of glitchy beats, while 'Your National Pride Is Hidden Lonely Grief' – all chiming, orchestral techno – definitely wins best title.

The standout track is 'Come Back Soft', featuring Haiku Salut. Its percussive, cut-up groove drops down to spare, Talk Talk-esque horn and piano, before climaxing with a slow surge of ecstatic noise. **JB**



VARIOUS ARTISTS

Tone Science Module No 6: Protons And Neutrons

DiN

Sunderland's Ian Boddy continues his prolific forays into modular synthesis and analogue electronics with this sixth 'Tone Science' collection. The DiN head honcho has collated nine tracks from nine modular musicians, both new and old, and as ever, we're led down highly engaging sonic rabbit holes and sound worlds.

Ambient veteran and former Rising High artist James Bernard sets the scene – his opening 'Prisms' track unfurls exquisitely, slowly morphing from chilled bubbling to soaring Vangelis-style beauty. But this is an album that doesn't always play by preconceived ambient rules.

Another established name, Arizona's Steve Roach, offers us the frisky, hyperactive 'Random Possibilities', which proves thoroughly addictive and much more full of life than its ambient tag suggests. Conversely, 'Eddy Currents' by Lancaster solo act Field Lines Cartographer is laid-back to the point of being horizontal, cocooning you in its warm ebb and flow. Blinding us with (tone) science, in a good way. **BW**

FRAGILE X

Human Condition

CUE DOT

Thriving Derbyshire imprint Cue Dot has only been around since September 2020, but it's already become something of a fixture on these pages, and rightly so. 'Human Condition', the label's 12th release, is the latest compelling instalment.

Conceived by Fragile X (aka Glaswegian producer J Gorecki), it's essentially a reflection on birth, mortality and some of the tricky life bits in between. Given that Gorecki is also the founder of Glasgow's excellent Bricolage label, which specialises in underground electronics and "distinctive sonic adventures", you'd expect 'Human Condition' to be rather good – and you'd be right.

As with last year's 'Inner Circle' and 'Between Worlds' albums, Gorecki's cinematic sound designs here are rich and sonorous – with definite nods to Tim Hecker and Fennesz – evoking vivid images as they swirl and resound around you. At its most immersive on the skittering thrum of 'Space Of Appearance' and the Berlin School-esque 'You Are', 'Human Condition' is a highly rewarding listen. **VI**

REINHOLD WEBER

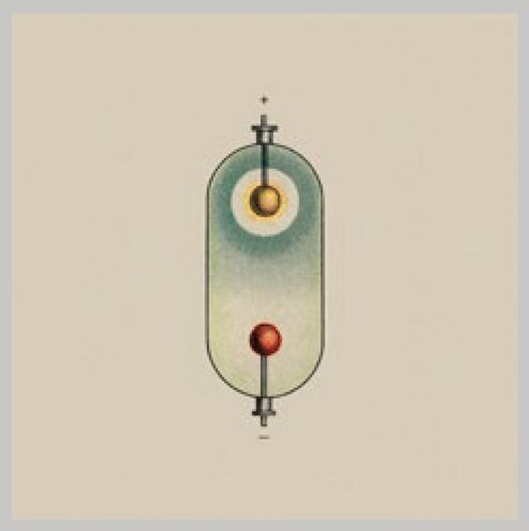
Complete Electronic & Phonetic Works 1968-1974

SUB ROSA

Between volleys of radiophonic lightning bolts, which rumble and crash into a boiling primordial soup of analogue electronics, the sermon-like voice of German actor Kurt Müller-Graf decants a biblical narrative. The piece is 'Schöpfung (Part 1)' – "Creation (Part 1)" – and, fittingly, it's the opening track on this collection of pioneering electronic composer Reinhold Weber's later work.

Despite being less well known than contemporaries such as Karlheinz Stockhausen, the German-born Weber is most effective in conveying the idiosyncratic character of the artist. 'Musica Mundana, 1969' sculpts fuzzy electronics into unsettling sci-fi squelch that, in places, recalls the early electronics of Delia Derbyshire and John Baker.

However, with their abrasive concrète clash and clang, these pieces are actually closer to the organised sounds of Edgard Varèse, most compellingly evident on the compilation's closer, 'Gammaexpress', which sounds like a spaceship factory being melted. **ST**



O YUKI CONJUGATE

A Tension Of Opposites: Vol 1 & 2

WORLD OF ECHO

Midlands post-industrialists in sync

Active since the early 1980s, Nottingham's O Yuki Conjugate went through several line-up changes before settling down as the duo of founding members Roger Horberry and Andrew Hulme. 'Scene In Mirage', their first album from 1984, found the group producing a sound not unlike Jon Hassell pitching a fourth world tent in Eno's ambient bush of ghosts. Their approach to composition over the ensuing 38 years is best described as sitting somewhere between macroscopically detailed and the resolutely lo-fi, incorporating found sound and other instruments where the need arises.

Ironic, perhaps, that the verb "conjugate" can be defined as "joining different elements together", when 'A Tension Of Opposites' was, through the necessity of lockdown, recorded completely separately. Not for O Yuki Conjugate the potentially more logical approach of a remote, file-sharing collaboration. Instead, Horberry recorded the first volume, 'At Variance', at his studio in York, while Hulme crafted the tracks that formed the second volume, 'Into The Pleasure Garden', in London. The results were released on limited edition cassette in 2021 and are now receiving a deluxe vinyl reissue, also heralding the start of a series of similar releases.

It's interesting to hear two members of a group operating independently and yet producing results that are stylistically so alike, almost as if they form part of a single structure. The key differences lie in duration and instrumentation. Pieces like 'Antipode' and 'Anomic' on the first volume are shorter and outwardly appear almost completely electronic, while the four tracks on the second volume mostly run over the 10-minute mark, featuring Joe Lamb's subtly expressive saxophone alongside quiet flute from Clare Elliott and considered guitar motifs by Billy Hulme. Of these, the uncertain 11-minute 'I Don't Know I'm Not A Dream' – an existential pondering in two years of existential ponderings – stands out for its fusion of density and levity.

The last couple of years have seen unprecedented numbers of meditative electronic music releases flood the market. Creating pieces able to genuinely rise above that mass of material has been a challenge. 'A Tension Of Opposites' is one such release – music for thinking, sleeping, dreaming and, above all, just… being.

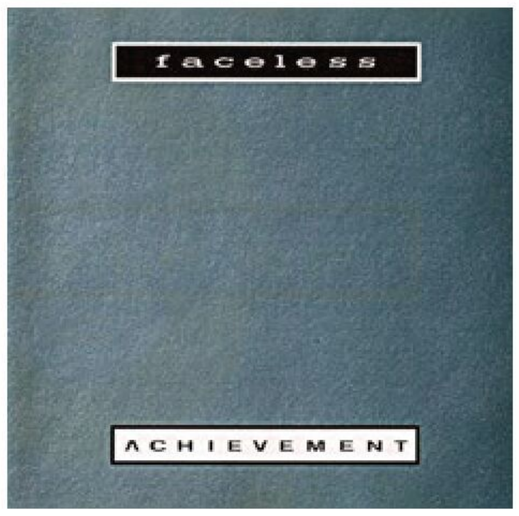
MAT SMITH

Brief Encounters

O Yuki Conjugate's Andrew Hulme and Roger Horberry face the quick-fire question machine

Hello – where are you right now and what can you see?
RH: "At home in sunny York. The leaky drain needs fixing."
AH: "A living room in London. A child is playing Aimblox, there's a paused TV screen and a half-finished game of the hilariously named 'Pandemic'."
OYC are celebrating 40 years at the coalface this year – happy birthday!
RH: "Thank you. It feels longer."
AH: "It's been tough."
That's some landmark. How are you celebrating? Will there be cake?
RH: "That was for our 25th – the last time we made a fuss about birthdays – so maybe we'll get lucky. There's also the small matter of an album tentatively called 'OYC40' featuring all members past and present, but it's early days."
AH: "No cake. We're watching our cholesterol."
You were initially inspired by post-punk, weren't you? What in particular?
RH: "It was clever and so varied. Every month there was something new from all over the country – but never Nottingham, our home town."
AH: "The spirit of liberation, the idea that you had a right to make music whether you could play or not. The sheer adventurousness. It was brilliant."
You've had some lengthy fallow periods – is that just life getting in the way?
AH: "We just naturally stopped making music as one incarnation ceased, then picked it up later when we found our passion for it again. In hindsight, it seems to have added diversity to the lonely furrow we've ploughed."
The new album is a double, with writing divided in two. Is that a new way of working for you? Was it purely a matter of necessity?
RH: "In the first big lockdown, we were faced with the problem of what the fuck you do when you suddenly can't meet. We made an album each."
'Vol 1' is short tracks, 'Vol 2' is long tracks. Who tackled what?
RH: "It came naturally. I'd always wanted to do something like Eno's 'Music For Films' – simple, single-theme sketches featuring melody of sorts. And Andrew had wanted to go deep."
AH: "We'd already discussed the idea that Roger liked short pieces and I like long ones. The situation meant we could realise this idea without being shackled to any greater notion of what the band should sound like."
Your 1984 debut album 'Scene In Mirage' had two distinct sides. Do you feel like you've come full circle?
RH: "We've never been able to really land on what we are – it was always more than one thing – ambient, fourth world, industrial, electronic. So we do these distinct sides and embrace that."
As ambient pioneers, do you feel like you get the credit you deserve?
RH: "That's absolutely not for us to say. But now you mention it…"
AH: "I think we fill in the gap between Eno's original idea and the point in the late 1980s when ambient turned into chill-out and gained acceptance."
Are you happy with the "cult status" tag?
RH: "I bloody love it. Wilful obscurity is our defining feature."
What's next for you?
RH: "Back to gigging in Europe at long last, another 'A Tension Of Opposites' cassette, and 'OYC40'. The fun never stops."

Buried Treasure



FACELESS

Achievement

NOISEBOX, 1995

Norfolk's answer to The Chemical Brothers, Alistair Cormack and Thomas Albrighton were an ambient dub duo from Norwich. I know this because along with my good friend and fountain of brilliantly stupid ideas, Dominic, we managed them. I say manage…

I can't quite recall how it happened, but I think it goes like this. Dominic worked at a music venue in the city and a compilation on the local Noisebox label came his way. Released in 1994, 'Mechanical Paradise' featured four "ambient electronic" acts – UXB, Toxic Frequency, Alpha Seven and Faceless. Alpha "Pete Roberts" Seven ran a night called Sofa with Dominic, so with him on the same album it's likely that's how we all met.

What I do know is Al and Tom met at university and bonded over a love of sub-bass. Turns out, as they neatly put it, they worshipped at the altar of it. Their two tracks on the collection – the choral loops, steel drum melody and Bentley Rhythm Ace-ism of 'Edenville' and the tinkling Aphex swirls, low-slung vocal sample and thudding bass of 'DSL' were epic transmissions. Listening to those tracks now (the CD is currently £2.91 on Discogs) you can hear why we wanted in. The problem was neither of us had a clue about what we were doing. Still, it seemed like a good idea at the time.

While we were at the wicket though, we released their excellent debut album, 'Achievement'. It still more than holds its own. The western-y guitar twang loop, louche drum breaks and menacing wah-wahs of 'Two Faceless Men' is quite the opener. There's the room-shuddering bass and curious "Is it a girl / Is it spider" sample of 'That Little Feeling', the steady pulse and earworm "Calm your life down" mantra of, erm, 'Calm Your Life Down'… and that's just the first three tracks. With the wave of quality DIY releases washing over these pages each month, Faceless would have been right up there. If they weren't 25-odd years too early.

The promos for 'Achievement' went out in handmade, attention-grabbing wooden boxes. Living down the road in Suffolk, John Peel was regularly at gigs in Norwich, usually on his own. Dominic had befriended him some years earlier, offering some good gigging company. Which is how we came to deliver a copy of the album personally to Peel Acres, and how they got played on his Radio 1 show. Result. At one point, George Evelyn was slated to do a remix, but…

Faithless were kicking off at the same time and we would often get congratulated for landing our band in the charts. Who were we to disabuse anyone of the idea that it wasn't our band? Faceless were so very good, they really should have been contenders. Managers, eh?

NEIL MASON

RODNEY CROMWELL

Memory Box

HAPPY ROBOTS

Magical realism meets nostalgic synthpop

Rodney Cromwell, the alter ego of Happy Robot label boss Adam Cresswell, continues his evocation of the golden age of bedroom electronica after a seven-year wait for album two. It's as if that burgundy-toned synth era of the early 1980s had just carried on regardless, and the outsider boys and girls hadn't sold their synths and Fostex 4-tracks in Loot and disappeared into grown-up life.

It's that sort of aching nostalgia that informs 'Memory Box' – the sense of loss and the joy of rediscovery when you catch a whiff of the pop culture swirl of vanished years, the sensation of coming across your faded teenaged handwriting on the J-card of the TDK D90.

Rodders has filled his memory box with a varied arsenal of techniques. The sounds, of course, lean on the analogue wheezes and white noise rhythms of the old days. There's also the lineage of influences, listed in the press materials – Kraftwerk, Neu!, The Cure, Silver Apples, Oppenheimer Analysis and Polyrock. Nice to see that latter band cited, an overlooked late 1970s New York outfit fusing Philip Glass minimalism (Glass produced both their albums) with uptight post-punk hues. Then again, there's 'Fluctuations', a glorious homage to Stereolab, whose own debt to Polyrock and the German trinity of Neu!, Cluster and Harmonia creates a further layer in this exercise of Memorex recursion.

From the bouncing octave baseline of 'Intercom' to 'The Winter Palace' with its electric piano tinkling away, like Ralf Hütter's gentle melodic constructions of the early 1970s, the album's real strength comes from Cromwell's gift for melody. Take 'Opus Three', a pop hit in an alternative universe where New Order pressed Stylophones into service. It very nearly slips the tethers of the DIY aesthetic to soar into a blue sky of pop possibilities.

'Memory Box' itself has the dreamy feel of a theme for one of those early 1970s TV shows with hip, attention-grabbing theme tunes – part 'Zoo Gang', a little bit 'Persuaders' – while 'Waiting Room' is a bass guitar-driven slice of twee heaven. These memories can't wait.

MARK ROLAND

VARIOUS ARTISTS
A Collective Memoir
URVAKAN

The team behind Urvakan, Armenia's progressive art and music festival, have put together this deeply resonant compilation featuring recordings by artists from Armenia, Georgia, Russia and Ukraine, all centered around hauntological music.

Urvakan is the Armenian word for ghost, phantom or spirit, and the eight tracks here all feel as though they dip in and out of the physical realm. Tbilisi's Ana Jikia combines electronic washes amid a rabble of vocal fragments and scattershot horns on 'Splint', while St Petersburg-born Perila offers up the hypnotic, subterranean 'Double Echo', and fellow Russian L delivers sputtering tape manipulations on 'Stretched Logo'.

On the home front, I s' (the spelling's theirs) gorgeous ambient dreamscape is a highlight, as is the spectral, droning 'False Awakening' by Nystagmus. This is a beautiful collection of musique concrète, sound collage and field recordings, and crucially, all proceeds will go to humanitarian and war relief organisations in Ukraine and the South Caucasus. **CF**

CARPENTER BRUT
Leather Terror
UNIVERSAL

It was out of nowhere in February 2018 that French dark-synth artist Carpenter Brut (real name Franck Hueso) released his second long-player 'Leather Teeth', an imaginary film soundtrack. That record was about science student Bret Halford, who likes a girl that doesn't like him back. After brewing a concoction to get what he wants, he disfigures himself and becomes Leather Teeth, the lead singer of Leather Patrol.

'Leather Terror', the sequel, takes those razor-sharp synths and glam rock edges and punches the ignition as our anti-hero becomes a serial killer. The ominous war drums of 'Opening Title' build into 'Straight Outta Hell', a haunted house of chaotic electronics. There are surprises here too, like the bright synthpop heights of 'Lipstick Masquerade'. It is sharply contrasted by the title track, which sounds like Carpenter Brut is gigging from hell itself with Satan and his entourage on vocals. Wake up, and smell the leather. **FM**

SCANNER
La Fenêtre Magique
WERRA FOXMA

Sometimes we get Surveillance Scanner, who bugs your pot plants to record your candid chatter. Sometimes we get Cuddly Scanner, with a warm ambient hug and absolutely no hidden microphones, honest. This is an improvised set for Letters From Mouse's electronica radio show 'The Magic Window', committed to vinyl for West Lothian label, Werra Foxma.

It's largely one mighty, morphing track, titled 'Blinking In Time'. Suspended chords siren into the void, like an untethered lighthouse floating far into the ocean. We're then waterfalled into a chasm of sandpapered Autechre-esque rhythm and, gloriously, a strangled Moroder disco pelted with clattering drums. We're not even halfway.

A tick-tock loop trapped in tense reverberations leads to a pastoral echo of the opening chords, beautifully sullied by a snarling bass wash. The maximalist coda 'After Magnetism' provides all of the frequencies all of the time. Lovely. Everything including the kitchen sink – check the outlet pipe for bugs. **FR**

MR OIZO & PHRA
VOILÀ
ED BANGER

In 2016, Quentin Dupieux told Dazed magazine that his raison d'être was to "create some logic inside the random". Keep this in mind when considering his neo-surrealist output – from Flat Eric to his 2019 film 'Deerskin' ("Le Daim") in which Jean Dujardin takes orders from an autocratic and jealous coat. Mr Oizo is a queer bird, and one who undoubtedly makes the world a better place.

Take 'VOILÀ' – a big beat hip hop collaboration with Francesco "Phra" Barbaglia, the Italian MC best known as one half of Milan DJ crew, Crookers. Dupieux tears up samples like a French Madlib, while Phra rolls his Rs beautifully, even when he's spitting about something as mundane as pizza and chips.

The funky 'Foie Gras' packs a feel-good factor, as does 'Hot In Her', a half cover of Nelly's 'Hot In Herre'. Moreover, 'VOILÀ' features some of the finest utilisation of autotune you're likely to hear, and the whole thing may inspire further adventures in Italian rap thanks to the richness of Phra's delivery. **JA**

MONOCHROME ECHO
Moonkeeper Exodus
SPUN OUT OF CONTROL

A year on from the first instalment of his 'Moonkeeper' trilogy, Divine Comedy bassist Simon Little is still marooned in orbit around 24th century Jupiter, where malevolent alien forces have derailed the terraforming of Ganymede and Callisto. Which might make his spring touring schedule a little hairy.

Still, this sparkling album of 1980s-infused radiophonica soundtracks the battle with melodic exuberance. Certainly, those 'Doctor Who' fans who grew up with Paddy Kingsland's earworms lodged in their lugholes might find themselves wistfully recalling Vimto-fuelled Dalek battles in the school playground.

'Lost Transmissions' sets the tone with a proggy synth workout and drums loud enough to ripple the waters on Europa. 'We Are Not Alone' is spookily sparse, while 'Crossing The Void' adds the kind of shimmering arpeggios that accompanied Peter Davison's terse run-ins with the Time Lords. And 'Deimos Division' boasts delicious synthpop beats from the funkier end of the solar system, strongly suggesting the relief spaceship from Mars might just be piloted by Giorgio Moroder. **BF**

VARIOUS ARTISTS
Sounds From The Iranian Ultraverse
SHAYTOON

Presenting the idea of an "ultraverse", a place of positivity and beauty that's the polar opposite of life on Earth, this compilation by New York label Shaytoon primarily concerns itself with escapism. We find ourselves transported through Aria Rostami's 'Birth In The Garden Triptych', full of lush atmospherics, soothing synth pads and calming birdsong, before surveying the landscape at high velocity from the serene and emotive techno vantage point of Voiski's 'Nouvelle Vague'.

Things get chaotic and reminiscent of real life on Kasra V's restless electro throwback 'Thousand Year Dream' and Temp-Illusion's noisy 'Lethal Corrosion', while Paramida's standout 'Konbanwa (Ibiza Mix)' suggests that the ultraverse is largely soundtracked by early 1990s tribal house euphoria, replete with hand percussion, fat bass tones and swirling female vocal samples.

Proceeds go towards providing crucial medical and social support in Afghanistan, a reminder that fictional interzones like the ultraverse are sadly wishful thinking. **MS**

ZOMBIE ZOMBIE

Vae Vobis

BORN BAD

Dead language brings Gallic electro to life

On 2017's 'Livity', these French trippy hippies gave us wonky sci-fi and Underworld's 'Rez' on caffeine. This latest album is quite different. Taking their cue from Dutch philosopher and Latin purist Erasmus, the electro trio delve deep into the Middle Ages for an album of… let me just check my notes… er, black mass Latinate prog techno-opera and cryptic Pagan rituals. With tons of vocoders. Crumbs.

Their chalice runneth over pretty quickly, opening with a bombastic organ and a wobbly fuzz bass navigating shards of squirming guitar. Think Rick Wakeman doing 'Phantom Of The Opera', and he's dressed like the Phantom and everything. Next come the vocoder vocals, of which there are oodles, often frothed into a choral apocalypse courtesy of their 'Doomed Angels' backing singers. The voices are frowning and fateful and proclaim things like "Woe to you!", but in Latin.

'Nusquam Et Ubique' lands brilliantly within this bedlam. It's a bouncy electro thumper that tightens up the loose drums, a signature part of the Zombie Zombie sound. With that head of steam built up, the band then swaps the historic with the cinematic, as doomscape becomes widescape. A dripping modular synth cycle makes space for a more whimsical choral melody, while low-burning tribal percussion leads a procession of simmering gongs and ritualistic howls. The black mass is still dark, just a little more slate grey.

By the time we get to 'Lacrymosa', the see-sawing vocal melodies are almost akin to musical theatre. Despite the early infernal promise burning less strongly, there are highlights later on. There's the crowd-pleasing singalong of 'War Is Coming' and its analogue sweeps, the vocoders working well here as a spectacular naysayer. And 'Consortium' feels like a religious marching song, all swinging sceptres and smells, pepped up by robotic Latin pronouncements and exactly the right level of kinetic rhythm. These boys know how to wield a drumstick.

Are we blessed by this black mass vocoder voodoo or cursed for all eternity? I don't know because my brain is now mush, but I'm glad they opened this very singular portal. As an ancient bloke once said, "Qui habet aures audiendi audiat".

FAT ROLAND

Label Profile

Label: Hallow Ground
Location: Switzerland
Est: 2013

Potted History:

"Hallow Ground came about more by accident than design," says label founder Remo Seeland. "It was chance, friendships and spontaneous contacting that made us release albums. Soon this adventure was a surefire success and it just seemed sensible to continue."

Mission Statement:

"We release music that engages directly with the listener, that may change consciousness and perception," says Seeland. "Our slogan is 'Music and art that leads to visions' – so it should grow beyond itself. In fact, our most recent compilation, 'Epiphanies', explores that very concept and I think the result is impressive, engaging and touching."

Key Artists & Releases:

"We have been involved in bringing international recognition to more than a few artists. Kali Malone and FUJI||||||||||TA, for example, were more or less only known to a local audience before their releases on Hallow Ground, and it's nice to see our belief in our artists bearing fruit. We've also published the first vinyl editions of Swans guitarist Norman Westberg's solo works. My current Hallow Ground favourite is Lawrence English's haunting long-player 'Observation Of Breath'. I'm so mesmerised by these recordings that I'm unable to do anything other than listen while I give them a spin – I'd say it's a sort of forced deep listening and deep breathing!"

Future Plans:

"We just keep going on, that's the plan," explains Seeland. "It seems there's a definite need for the music we release and there's no shortage of talented and visionary artists out there. We're passionate about discovering and showcasing their work while we make friends along the way. In such horrifying times – pandemic, war, climate change – it's important to remember that music can bring people together and even give solace."

Any Other Business?

"One lesson learned so far is that running a label also means meeting some hard-nosed capitalists," says Seeland. "We're very much rooted in the DIY scene, even if we work very efficiently and professionally. For us, DIY is an ethical practice. Respectful, empathic and transparent communication is very important to us – but this is not everyone's way of thinking and behaviour, of course. We've learned that the source of music that touches us, stimulates us intellectually and drives us forward seems inexhaustible, and that the creators of these wonderful sounds are very often wonderful people."

For more, see hallowground.bandcamp.com

First And Last And Always

Composer/multi-instrumentalist **Franz Kirmann** on the first and last records he bought, and the one he always turns to in an emergency

FIRST

DEPECHE MODE

Some Great Reward

MUTE, 1984

"I grew up in Senegal and got this on cassette from a street vendor. I asked my mum to buy it for me, it was the mid-to-late 1980s. It shaped a lot of my musical taste. It took me a while to get into it, but I loved the contrast of the harsh industrial sounds and sweetness of the melodies. It was because of Depeche Mode that I got into industrial, coldwave and EBM as a teenager."

LAST

SMAGGHE & CROSS

1819

OFFEN MUSIC, 2020

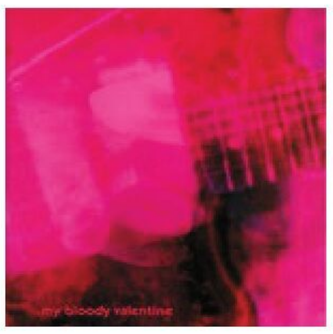
"I bought this on Bandcamp from Vladimir Ivkovic's label, Offen Music. It's hard to describe, it's a pretty awkward record! It doesn't sound like anything else around. It's very intimate, with a fragile sadness and there's a vulnerability about it. I will be spending a lot of lonely hours in its company."

ALWAYS

MY BLOODY VALENTINE

Loveless

CREATION, 1991



"What is there to say that hasn't already been said about this album? A truly unique sound, the drums are muffled, you can't make out the words, the wall of noise, it sounds like a broken radio… It's like you are not hearing the music, but remembering it. This is an album that still holds so much mystery to me and that's probably why I love it so much."

FRANZ KIRMANN

Forget Me Not

BYTES

Sonic meditations on our innermost worlds

The sixth studio album from talented film score composer Franz Kirmann finds the London-based Frenchman in philosophical mode, exploring subconscious emotions and troublesome feelings like loss and longing.

Kirmann has a real knack for understatement when capturing mood, sentiment and tone, both as a solo artist and also in collaboration with composer Tom Hodge on their post-classical project, Piano Interrupted. But what really seems to have laid the ground for this outstanding album is the work he has done for TV – in particular, for BBC Four's BAFTA-winning 'Storyville' documentary 'Locked-In: Breaking The Silence', which examines the considerable complexities around locked-in syndrome.

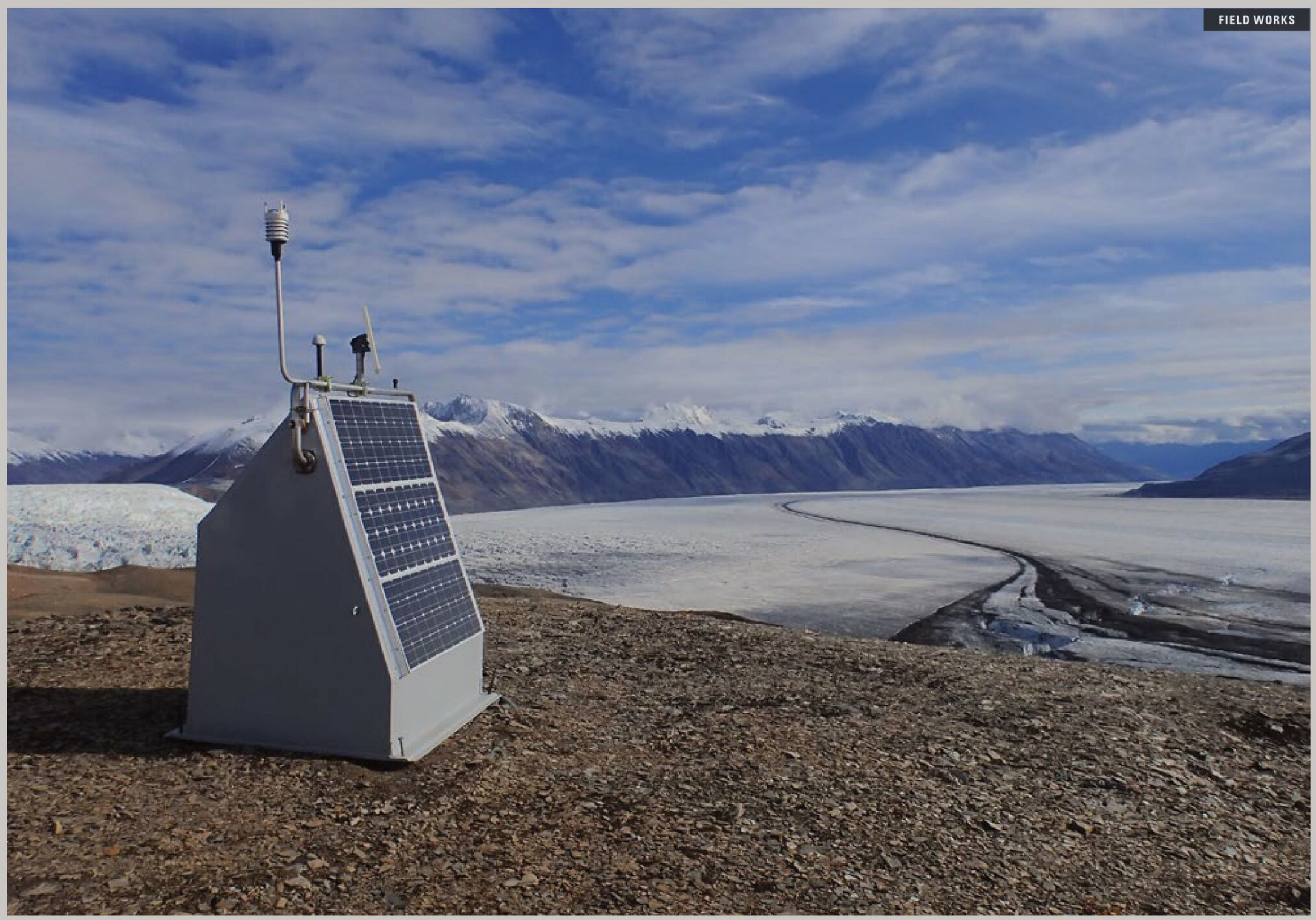
Part of that film's success was down to Kirmann's intensely sympathetic accompaniment. Make no mistake, 'Forget Me Not' is equally stunning – and quite possibly his best and most blissful work to date. It's a brave piece too, and we don't mean that as a byword for "challenging", because this sublime album is anything but. Nuanced intricacy and wistful poise are expertly constructed and layered – you'll hear echoes of My Bloody Valentine's dense, blurred melodies, Burial's haunted nostalgia and Boards of Canada's aching, sunset melancholy.

That said, it's Susumu Yokota's more inward-looking ambient oeuvre that's evoked on delicate opener 'Vestiges'. Its febrile, twilit piano keys, disembodied vocals and near-imperceptible background drone are the epitome of pensive reverie, setting just the right tone for the rest of this beautiful, gradually unfolding work.

Further in, the sheer opalescence of 'Your Tenderness' is astounding. Kirmann's skilful composition is immense – he sets sepulchral, heavily treated female vocals against a miasma of blinding colour and kaleidoscopic light, hinting at a deep emotional equanimity.

With its implied reference to the complexity of grief and loss, 'Forget Me Not' no doubt represents an entirely personal chapter for Kirmann. But as with any downtempo work that resonates closely with the listener, there's a universality at play here that connects us with a sometimes ineffable aspect of the human condition. Which is quite the achievement.

CARL GRIFFIN



FIELD WORKS
Stations
TEMPORARY RESIDENCE

Stuart Hyatt's Field Works project finds him and a host of collaborators blending found sounds and electronics for a series of themed albums. 'Stations' is the 10th, and asks an intriguing question – what does the Earth sound like?

Working with scientists at the EarthScope experiment (a network of seismic stations designed to examine the planet's geological processes), Indianapolis musician Hyatt entwines recordings of deep Earth rumblings with sung vocals. Singers and musicians Hanna Benn, Janie Cowan, Masayoshi Fujita, Laraaji, Qasim Naqvi and Brad Weber feature across 'Stations', and though the concept seems obscure, the results are beautiful.

'Station 6' teems with warm double bass and a lush melody, while the descending bells, backwards synths and skittering rhythms of 'Station 7' will send shivers down your spine. The deluxe vinyl edition also features bonus remixes by the likes of Afrodeutsche, Nathan Fake and Penelope Trappes. Another reason to invest. **BM**

SOUNDWALK COLLECTIVE
Lovotic
ANALOGUE FOUNDATION

This loose New York collective might have just topped their previous form, despite past collaborations with Patti Smith and Jean-Luc Godard. Their debut release for Berlin's Analogue Foundation label is a sex robot album. Computer controlled machines getting their end away.

Hear that voice proclaiming robotic erotics over the title track's pleasingly mechanical groove? That's actor Willem Dafoe. The one lecturing about primal instincts and desire? Avant-garde composer Lyra Pramuk. And throughout we are led by their "artificial Eve" Charlotte Gainsbourg, whispering, incanting, enchanting.

Her romantic pronouncements are corrugated by churning electronics, her soundwaves echoed by metallic plates of cold ambience. Without the vocals, the musical mechanics could be desolate. Even the bold arpeggios stretching their envelopes over the memorable 'Blessed Are The Lovers' melt into a regretful industrial haze. The spatial sounds, however, seem in thrall to Gainsbourg's voice. The emotional meets the computational. Gainsbourg becomes Gains-borg. Fascinating. **FR**

THE PATTERN FORMS
The Scenic Route
BELBURY MUSIC

Released on the Ghost Box label, The Pattern Forms' irresistible debut 'Peel Away The Ivy' was one of 2016's standout albums. They return here on GB's sister imprint, Belbury Music, with a collection of lush, sun-kissed instrumentals that pay homage to a singularly optimistic and soulful brand of 1980s library music.

The trio comprises Ed Macfarlane and Edd Gibson of Friendly Fires, together with producer and Advisory Circle synth maestro Cate Brooks, whose inimitable signature warmth suffuses everything here. This time around, they're joined by Florence And The Machine and Lunamoth harpist Tom Monger. His strings add something exceptional, lifting the dreamily nostalgic title track into an exultant, beatific space, while ensemble piece 'Fleeting Moment' brings everything together beautifully. Featuring Gibson's phenomenal guitar work, it glides along with shimmering, laid-back ease and will carry you up, off and away. **CG**

BLANCK MASS
Ted K
SACRED BONES

Since quitting Fuck Buttons to go solo as Blanck Mass, Edinburgh's Benjamin Power has been wholly prolific. Albums such as 2015's 'Dumb Flesh' and 2017's 'World Eater' introduced us to his dark and bristling electronics, a sound world inhabited by crushing bass and beats, and often ominous atmospheres.

With his mastery of mood, Power's work always feels well-suited to film, and his soundtrack for the 2020 movie 'Calm With Horses' was met with widespread acclaim. 'Ted K' is another score, this time for a film about Ted Kaczynski, the infamous Unabomber who sent lethal letter bombs and railed against technology from his backwoods isolation in Montana.

As you might expect, this is a typically sinister-sounding work. The gently unfolding, eerie synth melody of 'Revenge' grows in intensity, but 'Desecration' has a forlorn beauty in its melancholy tones. The threatening monosynth lead line of 'Dark Materials', meanwhile, has more than a touch of John Carpenter about it. Disquieting, but engrossing. **BM**

GOLDFRAPP
Felt Mountain
MUTE

When Goldfrapp's debut album 'Felt Mountain' was released in 2000, it sounded like trip hop's vapour trail – the noir, cinematic stylings of Portishead minus the sampled beats and scratches. This was an impression reinforced by the darkly sinuous voice of Alison Goldfrapp herself, who'd previously sung with Orbital and Tricky. But with this reissue, the sound world that Alison and her musical partner Will Gregory created in an isolated bungalow in the English countryside feels stranger and more resonant than ever.

The velvety 3am vibe is enlivened by operatic flourishes, oompah and yodelling, and some very fuzzy electronics, while the words touch on what it means to be human with sci-fi references to 'Blade Runner' and 'Gattaca'.

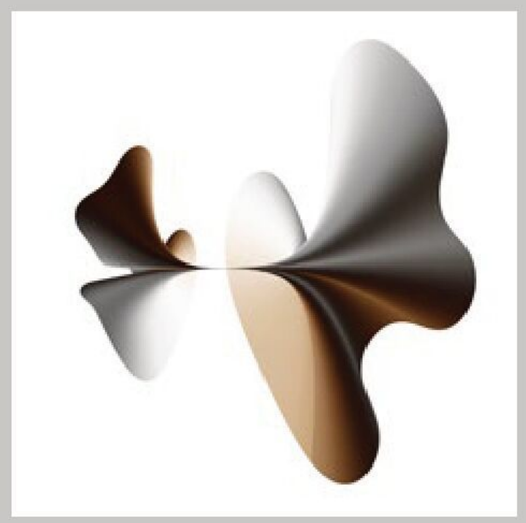
'Lovely Head' remains an exquisite piece of mysterio-pop, with that sudden wolf howl of synth (actually Alison's voice through a Korg MS-20), while the Satie-esque piano of 'Deer Stop' comes from deep in a dream, and 'Utopia' is literally breathtaking, like standing on an Alpine ridge at dawn. Good to revisit this mesmeric and audacious work. **JB**

EARTHEN SEA
Ghost Poems
KRANKY

There's something odd about the music of New York musician Jacob Long. On 2021's 'Elliptical Portraits', his drones radiate a kind of temporal disconnect, as though not observing the same rules as the rest of the soundscape, while 2019's 'Grass And Trees' evoked the slow certainty of nature's cycles.

With 'Ghost Poems', Long pushes this strange dislocation – 'Shiny Nowhere' shimmers as intermittent percussion strikes like a stuttering clock, while 'Felt Absence' gathers lush textures into emotive shapes before allowing them to separate like tectonic drift.

On closing track 'Deep Sky', the understated, bittersweet twinge bulges into full and potent melancholia, like a warm memory fading out of conscious grasp. These pieces are layered with lush ambient textures that yield sharp visceral hooks. But where earlier releases explored the effects of time on particular objects and places, 'Ghost Poems' casts a wider conceptual net, like a rumination on time itself. **ST**



MAX COOPER

Unspoken Words

MESH

Emotive electronics, no words necessary

Max Cooper has always made music that nourishes the brain even when there are no words to steer the listener or a narrative to carry the ideas. And yet, the inadequacy of language to convey meaning in the way that music can is the dichotomy at the centre of 'Unspoken Words'. From Wittgenstein to Derrida, entire philosophies have been built on understanding the limitations of language. Cooper appreciates this anomaly, ingeniously adding a non-verbal contribution to the discourse that acts as a kind of praxis instead of more self-defeating theory (and, ultimately, words).

Starting out as a techno DJ a decade and a half ago, the Belfast-born electronic musician of Australian descent slowly transmogrified from floor-focused EPs to conceptual albums that ask big questions and attempt to make some sense of the world we inhabit. He went from the club scene to soundtracking Greta Thunberg and the Pope at the recent COP26 in Glasgow, with commissions flooding in from institutions like London's Barbican in between.

Cooper's sonic trajectory started to take shape with his 2014 debut album 'Human' – once he'd embarked on a career in music over his previous chosen PhD field in Computational Biology, that is. Science's loss is our sensory gain, with 'Unspoken Words' a fully formed, textural work of exquisite beauty and emotional sympatico. He might be prolific, but there's never any stinting on detail.

Tracks like 'Pulse At The Centre Of Being' draw you in with gentle sequencing, while 'Broken Machines Broken Dreams' offers an alternative, more challenging ambient landscape. Los Angeles artist Kotomi joins him on 'Inanimate To Animate' and 'A Model Of Reality', making vocal sounds that have no audible shape or meaning, not unlike 'Scalar' from Cooper's 'Yearning For The Infinite' (2019), where Alison Moyet's words are chopped up and fed into the mix so that they make no conventional sense.

And yet played together, these tracks are a great tapestry of variegated emotional states, emitting empathy and, on the penultimate track 'Everything', a sense of enlightenment. 'Unspoken Words' is sonic balm by design, a welcome series of soundscapes for uneasy times.

JEREMY ALLEN

HANNAH PEEL & PARAORCHESTRA

The Unfolding

REAL WORLD

Visionary electroacoustic collab runs deep

"There's a sense of deep-rooted humanity," says Hannah Peel of this superlative new record. "That our time here on Earth is short and we will never fully hear the rocks sing, as they shift over millennia."

This is an album about time – deep time – and the impalpable evolution of landscape. Some four years in the making, 'The Unfolding' is the culmination of a 2018 summit between Peel and conductor Charles Hazlewood, whose Bristol-based Paraorchestra comprises both disabled and non-disabled musicians.

Holed up in a lockdown retreat on the Northern Irish coast, Peel confided to Electronic Sound in 2021 that she had become "obsessed with rocks, and rock formations". They might not literally sing here, but Peel's compositions – played with heart-melting precision by the orchestra and augmented by the shimmering vocals of Victoria Oruwari – feel suitably monolithic. And the immutable is infused with a dignified elegance and a sense of haunting, imperceptible life.

'The Universe Before Matter' is the 10-minute opener, a dreamless plateau from the cosmos before time began. Glacial strings and Oruwari's crystalline soprano surrender gracefully to the gentle flutter of woodwind as the planet coalesces, slowly building to a triumphant climax of creation. 'Wild Animal' adds primal rhythms, guttural whispers and pulsating electronic basslines. And the title track is indeed an unfolding – Linton Stephens' mournful bassoon is delicately coaxed into the sunlight by Oruwari's hymnal tones. It's a religious awakening, a spiritual unthawing.

In a world beset by shadows, Peel and her collaborators have created illuminated joy. 'Perhaps It Made Us Happy For A Minute' is, in fact, four minutes of fluttering giddiness. 'We Are Part Mineral' is a rhythmic powerhouse, fuelled by the thunderous drumming of the Paraorchestra's Jonny Leitch.

Comparisons seem crass. The avant-garde experiments of John Cale, Terry Riley and Scott Walker may be vaguely relevant, but 'The Unfolding' is untempered Hannah Peel, and the penultimate 'Part Cloud' is the finest distillation yet of her effervescent approach to her art. As rippling synths succumb to orchestral bliss, even your stony old hills might be moved to salute a woman who is – to paraphrase – lying in the gullies, but looking at the stars.

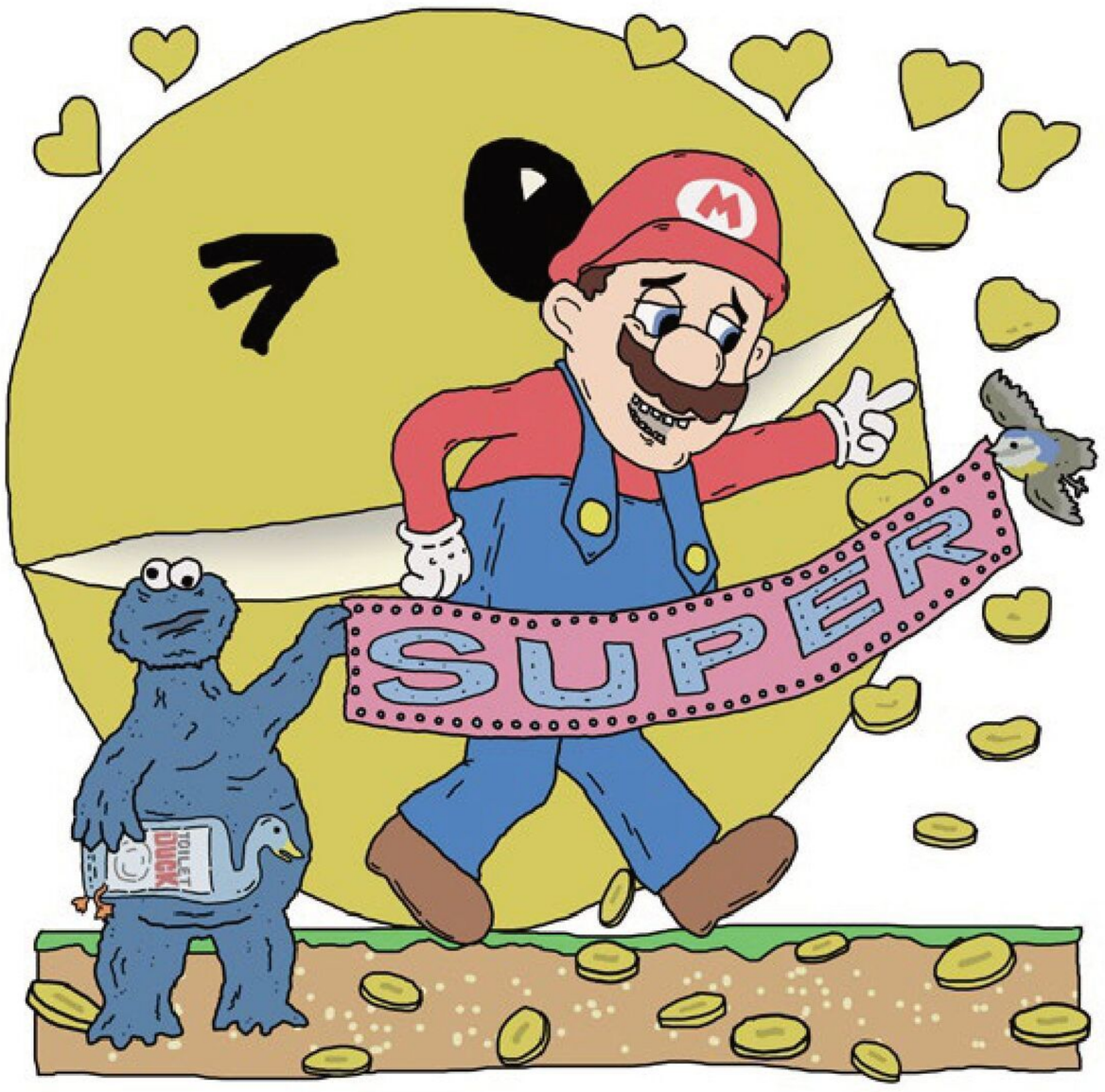
BOB FISCHER

REVIEWS BY
JEREMY ALLEN,
JOE BANKS,
SCOTT BLIXEN,
BOB FISCHER,
CLAIRE FRANCIS,
CARL GRIFFIN,
VELIMIR ILIC,
ISAAK LEWIS-SMITH,
NEIL MASON,
FINLAY MILLIGAN,
BEN MURPHY,
FAT ROLAND,
MARK ROLAND,
MAT SMITH,
SPENSER TOMSON,
BEN WILLMOTT

BANGING ON

When a so-called columnist expresses a desire to get jiggy with a video game character... We've made the call, they are coming to take him away

WORDS AND PICTURES: FAT ROLAND



In the 1980s, I had a plumber mate called Mario. He was a complete pain in the backside. We'd be chatting about rescuing a princess or something, and suddenly he'd jump onto a ledge to collect random coins. Couldn't just go to a bank like a normal person. He was on a mushroom-only diet and insisted on being called Super Mario. What a diva. I only hung out with him because I'd fallen out with my other mate Sonic. Sorry, but if you're blue, you can't be a hedgehog. The only blue animals are whales, tits and the Cookie Monster. And Toilet Duck, which may or may not be a real duck.

The one good thing about Mario was his music. He had this lo-fi music that followed him everywhere. People call it "chiptune", although you don't have to eat chips while listening to it. A fat pasty will suffice, or a lattice of pork. Chiptune is meant to sound like computer circuits, but I wouldn't know about that because I've never whanged a laptop down my earpipes.

Not for the first time, I regret to inform you that I have snuck a big fib under your schnozzle. I am a liar, like confidence tricksters, broadband speeds, and that thin raspy dude with the swirly eyes in the Jungle Book.

My introduction was a hilarious riff on the 1980s Nintendo game 'Mario Bros'. I didn't really know Mario. He was a fictional character made of pixels, and not of flesh and snot and willies like a human person. I suspect he wasn't even a plumber, despite his deeply practical dungarees. Total con. In fairness, Space Invaders didn't do galactic incursions and Donkey Kong wasn't an ass.

When I was young, my preferred console was the ZX Spectrum. The ZX stood for, er, Zigzagged Xenomorph because that's what its characters looked like when you squinted. It had blocky racing games, space journeys with dots for stars, and a surprisingly scary maze thing that was like Hampton Court in the apocalypse. These days you just press a button to play a game. Not so with the Spectrum. You had to carve a reel-to-reel tape player from granite then run up Mount Sinai to ask God to load the program. He'd get a plague of locusts to make a screeching sound for half an hour, then the whole thing would crash and you'd have to start again.

Speaking of mazes, I found Pac-Man sexually alluring. Is that too much information? I adored his boundless energy. His generous appetite. His perfect yellow complexion, like an ironed canary. I've not read much about the reproductive processes of Pac-Men, but I'd like to marry one and start a little Pac-Man family. Move into a lovely labyrinth in the countryside, preferably near a pharmacy, what with his debilitating addiction to pills. I'd play him my favourite music, like Ghostface Killah, and records on the Ghostly International label, and 'Ghost Town' by The Specials. I can't think of any reason why he wouldn't be OK with that.

It's the chiptune that I go back to, though. When Warp came along in the late 1980s, they took that bleep aesthetic and turned it into something more adult. As if Donkey Kong was suddenly into S&M. YOU CAN SEE IT IN HIS EYES. Without those early games, I never would have got into all that tricky disco. Love my 8-bit with added 808s. Wait! I thought of another one! Mandrills! They've got blue bums! Turns out there's loads of blue animals. Come back Sonic, all is forgiven.

CHORD

Chord Electronics Ltd.

Mojo 2

TOWERING ABOVE

Mojo 2's unique digital architecture towers above ordinary chip-DACs. With uniquely powerful processing, the world's first 'UHD DSP', plus class-leading technical performance, Mojo 2 is a landmark product in the audio landscape.

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